

**Normalization of the “Metanormal”:
Philosophic Issues in Michael Murphy’s Proposals**

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1. *Preliminary remarks: Murphy’s central thesis*

Unfortunately, the topics of this conference do not allow us to assume that we understand key terms similarly. For example, “normalization” of the paranormal could amount to a reduction of parapsychology to psychology, to a view of extraordinary powers and cognitions as extensions of ordinary, well-known capacities that are the subject of psychology. The normalization would mean that there are in psychokinesis, clairvoyance, precognition, et cetera, nothing that calls for a change in any of the broad theoretic assumptions that circumscribe current research in psychology or other branches of science. Michael Murphy in his new book proposes that extraordinary powers of action, feeling, and cognition, though to date exhibited (other than haphazardly and sporadically) only in a small minority of persons, can become normal to us all. The normalization that is his theme would be a real normalizing of these powers; “normalization” would be about a general historical occurrence—perhaps best understood as a veritable evolutionary saltus—much more than about theories, psychical research, or intellectual practices of whatever variety. The normalization that Murphy dreams of is of transformed persons, transformed to have certain powers of action, feelings, and operative cognitive abilities that are only “supernormal” now. His central proposal is that each of us has latent in us and within our near reach psychical powers and abilities that can be integrated into our normal functioning though they are not (at least for most of us or in an integrated fashion) normal now.

Michael Murphy’s view has a pragmatic bent: the point of his theorizing is service to transformative practice, he says. Beliefs can block as well as facilitate the emergence of the special powers etc., and Murphy feels that it is especially important for a person to accept the general possibility of their emergence in herself. Thus it is important that broad theoretic assumptions that would rule out this possibility be challenged. Further, the idea of the possibility needs to be integrated with a broad range of established beliefs both in science and everyday knowledge. My intention is to address what this strategy amounts to and to identify some of the issues it raises. And so we come around to another sense of ‘normalization’, a proposed normalization concerning how we should view the notion that we can ourselves become transformed persons with a variety of (ordinary) extraordinary powers.

In sharp contrast to the Whiteheadian approach of David Griffin, Michael Murphy does not attempt comprehensive theorizing. Although he has an adventuresome evolutionary thesis, the bulk of his book consists of reports and other data about exhibitions of special powers. It is a massive collection of

parapsychological and other evidence in support of the personal transformation thesis. And despite the evolutionary dress in which he presents the thesis, Murphy has not many abstract axes to grind, especially none metaphysical except to employ defensive maneuvers (resistance, for example, to a materialism that would rule out the possibility he champions). He does see—and point out—that the idea of normalization of the supernormal lines up with some world views better than others. But at the most abstract and general orders of theorizing, all he does is sketch affinities, “resonances,” as he says, with his transformation thesis. His overall strategy is, I repeat, to try to integrate this thesis with a certain range of warranted and generally accepted beliefs in everyday life and in a variety of theoretical domains, biology in particular, and in this context he apparently feels that he need not fly the flag of a specific metaphysics. Murphy’s most general proposals fall far short of a comprehensive system or world view, although, as I said, he does directly point to several metaphysical theories—including Whitehead’s—that line up well with his transformation thesis and the evolutionary formulation he provides. Murphy’s suggestions however broad are offered in a spirit of building only elementary bridging—connecting a variety of facts of exceptional functioning with other things we know—or of presenting supportive hypotheses tentatively only, with an aim to show a promising line of future integration not commonly considered.

As a philosopher I am not among those who scorn systematic metaphysics as constructing arbitrary castles in the air, and I appreciate both the attraction and the difficulty of system building. But regarding the phenomena Murphy shows us, my sense is that such a “bottoms-up” approach is generally to be commended for two reasons. First, if Murphy’s thesis about the possibility he holds before us is correct, then actual normalization would seem much more important than development of theory. By analogy, our actual motor skills are far more valuable than any theory about them, and ordinarily we need no understanding of how walking is possible to walk. Second, can any of us justifiably claim a very deep theoretic understanding of psychic phenomena and powers? While it seems to me (and probably to most in this audience) that the evidence for psi is convincing, there are psychological concerns such as brain chemistry and philosophic concerns such as the broader nature of mind-matter interactions about which no one knows very much. Because so little is known about the normal within psychology and the philosophy that is concerned with human cognition, emotion, and action, it would seem that little could be known about the paranormal. On the other hand, sometimes I find a deeper understanding than what Murphy provides essential to his own goal of establishing the possibility he wishes to establish. But based on these two reasons I have outlined, which support one another, there is a strong case to be made that Murphy has shown admirable self-restraint in shunning complexities and in general not making specific claims on difficult concerns but only “suggestions.”

Let me elaborate some of these points. Consider first of all what we should expect the state of theory to be concerning the psychic and paranormal if Murphy

is correct that we are in a phase of normalization. Surely understanding would become much more advanced as people began exercising the special powers in abundance. We might now face the marks of a “discovery” stage comparable to a classification of basic kinds in botany and zoology, although, as Murphy points out, earlier cultures may have had—mixed in with superstition—some true understanding of extraordinary “spiritual” capacities and their occult mediators or mediations. Furthermore, although even an elementary sorting is theoretical and subject to revision as we learn more and better organize our findings, some simple identification of kinds is generally required before development of any abstract and far-reaching theory. This has been called the “logic of discovery,” and Murphy it seems would heed it. Thus his tentativeness about certain broader psychological and philosophic issues his transformation thesis raises appears consistent with his judgment about the prospect of normalization.

The proposals most central to that thesis are nevertheless made clear. Without trying to achieve the precision of a science of the “paranormal,” nor trying to provide precisely conceived links with the propositions of any of the special sciences including biology, Murphy reasons from a time-tested faith in the uniformity of nature that human beings are fundamentally alike. Where these extraordinary capacities have emerged, namely human beings, there they can more widely and fully and “integrally” emerge. This emergence is desirable, and so the proper place for the paranormal is not for Murphy in the labs of academia but in everyday life. (It is significant that his paper for this conference, “Possibilities for Further Human Development,” highlights “spontaneous metanormalities” occurring among everyday people in everyday walks of life.)

In sum, while Murphy’s project raises several important philosophic issues—as well as, needless for me to point out, issues in parapsychology such as the appropriateness of certain types of experimentation—Murphy on the whole tries to steer clear of high-order theoretic commitment. Even the comparison of the dream of normalization to previous evolutionary jumps indicates principally how radical a change he believes is open, and his evolutionary thesis too is part of the project to show the general possibility of normalization of the “metanormal” and not to support a wider theory. Now it may be that a general view of the human subject—a psychology or a philosophic anthropology, or indeed a particular metaphysics such as process metaphysics—is required to understand at all adequately the phenomena and powers identified, or that at least much more than a classification within parameters provided by biology is needed here. I will discuss the connection with broader theories further, as I said. But roughly, my own judgment is that it is indeed often appropriate with Murphy’s project that problems be sketched out only and that wider issues raised (of mind-body interaction, for example) be left for future essays—and yet, as I will explain, there are one or two problems left by Murphy that cry out for redress immediately. That is to say, I feel that with one or two notable exceptions (e.g. the posit of a “supernature”) the theoretical lacunae do not much depreciate his accomplishment, and that in general the spirit and order of Murphy’s approach is commendable.

2. *Evolution and the “metanormal”*

The boldest and most sustained of Murphy’s interpretive ventures is his evolutionary speculation. Apparently, Murphy believes that an entire integration of psychical powers into the activities of everyday life—he calls this ideal “metanormal embodiment”—would be an “evolutionary transcendence,” comparable perhaps to the emergence of a new species, but perhaps even to the two great transcendences of the past, the appearance of life in matter and the appearance of mind in life. Much of Part One of his book is devoted to elaboration and defense of this “suggestion.”

That Murphy attempts to turn evolutionary theory to his advantage is striking for the reversal from the more common materialist use of this cornerstone of biological science. It is argued within materialist camps that evolutionary theory provides a way to understand the emergence of life and consciousness without assuming the existence of non-physical causes. Murphy is at pains to rule in the possibility of non-physical causes, and he spends several pages in Part One combatting the materialist view. Let me give a few of my own thoughts on the issue.

Evolutionary theory and genetics do indeed reveal mechanisms of life processes operative according to chemical and physical laws, but it is commonly known or at least admitted that much about ourselves and life processes (such as volition) biology, chemistry, and physics have not helped us to understand, at least not yet, and here by ‘much’ I do not mean the paranormal. Furthermore, strong materialist theses of mind-body identity face daunting difficulties with regard to various features of cognitive, affective, and volitional states, and volition in particular seems to entail non-physical causation. Biology does not show that everything with causal efficacy is physical. In a broad sense, an example of “psychokinesis” is my lifting my hand.

Moreover, evolutionary theory does not show that our current faculties of cognition, affection, and action are the best along any imaginable dimension. Microscopes reveal certain orders of things much better than our unaided eyes, and various instruments are capable of determining features of things whereof we have only the most indirect perceptual cognition. The fact that our species has to this point survived means only that our cognitive, etc. apparatus have not proved so *dis*advantageous to our reduplicating ourselves in progeny that the species has vanished. Therefore there is in principle room for future evolution and for everyday faculties that are superior to ours to emerge.

Murphy takes us a step beyond this rebuttal to try to use biology to illumine the metanormal while advocating (in broad outline) some of the very superagency theories that materialists are at such pains to denounce. It is fundamental to Murphy’s understanding of living things that evolutionary mechanisms are not only compatible but somehow continuous with both free human action and spiritual agencies that transcend the mechanisms of matter. Otherwise, he could make no sense, it seems, of the special powers and phenomena: all of these appear to Murphy to be most immediately the results of

either personal training and practice or “superagencies” somehow transcending matter (although this etiology is not well brought out, or at least not stressed in Part One). Let us not misconstrue the link with biology and evolutionary theory: the proposal is of an evolutionary *latency*—a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an actual emergence—a latency that has to be enlivened by personal effort or “superagencies” or both in some kind of interaction. Biology may illumine the latency, but I take it not the “superagencies” nor indeed the personal effort. One of the outstanding tasks that Murphy leaves us is how to view the interrelation of these factors, especially the role of the agencies that somehow transcend our world. Is what we need in this regard a much more comprehensive theoretical system? I will consider the issue again.

To carry our scrutiny of Murphy’s evolutionary thesis further, let us inquire about the likelihood that there be such future evolution. It is difficult to make an assessment about this for two reasons. First, Murphy is vague about details, and it is not clear what we should expect to occur biologically if he is right. Second and more fundamentally, according to Murphy’s conception much would depend on free choices (such as choices to take up and pursue transformative practices) and apparently on superagency activity as well. But taking Murphy’s proposal in its broadest lines, let us consider a few factors that seem to impinge on the real possibility of such an evolutionary jump.

In favor of such future evolution is the fact that any who were “metanormally embodied” would presumably be better able to control and fend off negative forces of the environment. (There are *Star Trek* episodes that illustrate this.) It is beyond dispute that metanormal embodiment as Murphy conceives it would entail some adaptive superiority just in that it would involve a better bodily and immediate control over things than is now normal to human beings (there would be superior affective features too). The new animals would have marked cognitive, motor, and other advantages over all other species including humans. But it is unclear that there would be a better overall control of the environment because it is unclear the extent to which these beings would use and master tools.

Plainly against the proposition of future evolution as Murphy conceives it is the fact that persons so transformed would not seem to be better able to reduplicate themselves, that is, leave progeny inheriting their accomplishments. Biologists have found no mechanism for inheritance of acquired characteristics; the children of a virtuoso violinist do not themselves master the instrument without similar dedication and effort. There may be a genetic basis for exceptional functioning, as Murphy argues in Chapter Ten of Part One. But how could a new species emerge—or there be an evolutionary transcendence—through mere enlivening of capacities that are already present? Doesn’t there have to be a genetic *mutation*? Murphy does not address this issue, but it seems a crucial one from an evolutionary perspective.

However, we must remember that what Murphy chiefly proposes is a possibility that we ourselves become metanormally embodied, a possibility that he interprets as an evolutionary latency. Of course, he would like the latency to

be widely realized and so he dreams of an evolutionary jump in line with the biological dress of his primary thesis. Yet the more fundamental link with life science is the latency proposal *tout court*. Indeed, Murphy does not believe that genetic mutation is a material *sine qua non* of the great leap he envisages (I have been reminded in personal conversation). And indeed, it seems much more likely that metanormal embodiment would be socially transmitted, like a language, not simply reproductively like a capacity to talk. The question is then the appropriateness of the “evolutionary jump” analogy. Perhaps it is simply misleading. In any case, it would seem we should not take the idea of “evolutionary transcendence” too seriously, understanding that all that Murphy really needs to uphold is a latency in our present genetic endowment for the special powers to emerge.

Does Murphy demonstrate such a latency? His argument is that since nothing in current biology rules it out, and that since there are the data and reports cited—the examples—in Part Two, therefore like every other human capacity this one is grounded, or permitted, genetically. If I have reconstructed the reasoning correctly, again I wonder at the purport of the evolutionary jump theme. But the basic case I find compelling.

Murphy’s evolutionary proposal faces, at least in its most full-blown version, several other issues and problems that challenge its overall value. Nevertheless, even limited success in integrating an understanding of the metanormal with biology and evolutionary theory would have, it seems to me, solid strategic value for Murphy’s aim to aid widespread personal transformation through a normalization of the idea of its possibility. If it is important that we believe we have such an opportunity, then the demonstration of an evolutionarily founded latency surely would help. After all, the human species is a natural biological kind, and an evolutionarily founded latency for the emergence of the powers, et cetera—a genetic endowment—would mean that facing us are real opportunities along these lines. But on this score, we need to hear more: esp. about (a) personal effort, because of the volitional nature of many “transformative practices,” and about (b) “superagencies” or a “supernature,” since this is taken to mediate certain powers and phenomena and to be revealed by certain “supernormal” experiences as well.

3. *The epistemic parallelism thesis*

No one attempting to explain volition has had much success, although we seem to exercise free will within constraints. I will come back to the question of personal volition and transformative practices in the next section. So what now about the second concern, the posit of “superagencies” and a “supernature?” Note that in philosophic circles, it is almost commonplace to defend, as Murphy does, a first-person perspective against explanations employing exclusively third-person categories of science. These defenses have an immediate appeal because we all have first-person perspectives. Without a clear idea about all the factors involved, we know nonetheless that as conscious in mind and will we are

different in some crucial respects from merely physical things. But talk of “superagencies” in contrast, that smacks of ghosts, while talk of a “supernature” seems just theology.

Do supernormal psychic abilities and mystical experiences provide reasons, as Murphy alleges, to accept a “supernature” or anything special that they are taken to reveal (e.g. “God,” “Brahman,” “Emptiness,” “Cosmic Consciousness,” “the Naguel”)? Let us focus on the “experiences” side of the question. According to a “precising” characterization of a “mystical experience,” let us say—in line with Murphy—that mystical experience involves a *taking*—on the part of the subject herself—of “superagencies” or a “supernature” to be evident. Is then this “taking” a reason to accept that what a mystic believes is revealed is real, even as limited to the rather broad and pale abstraction of Murphy’s “supernature?” To what extent should we believe the testimony of mystics?

In principal, I see no reason why some bits of mystic testimony should not be just as acceptable as testimony based on sense experience, especially when the person testifying demonstrates metanormal abilities. Special powers are evident intersubjectively, and one does not have to be a mystic to verify them. Exercise of such powers establishes some considerable *prima facie* credibility for mystics concerning the deliverances of their special experiences. Those “takings” in turn motivate lines of speculation such as are engaged by Murphy concerning “superagencies” and a “supernature.” Thus I believe these posits of his have indeed some real motivation and grounding. So let me elaborate this mysticism argument further, an argument that has a long and distinguished history both within several Eastern schools and in the West from William James to H. H. Price and such contemporary lights as William Alston. The various considerations that affect it and that have historically been most important are probably best expressed by William Wainwright in *Mysticism* (1982); in *Aurobindo’s Philosophy of Brahman* (1986) I devote the entire first chapter to the “epistemology of mysticism.”

To defend the “cognitive value” of mystical experience does not require a position on every issue of epistemological concern. The heart of the matter is whether mystical experiences are like sense experiences in connecting us with an objective reality with which we interact, and in grounding, or justly motivating, certain types of belief, such that when you tell me e.g. what you have *seen*—a donkey this morning say grazing on your neighbor’s grass—we both have reason to believe it.

Mystic claims, like other empirical claims, range from the highly abstract and general to the concrete and particular. Very general propositions standing at the center of entire religious world views qualify so long as the belief system is advanced at least in part on the basis of mystical evidence. An example of such a general or abstract claim might be, ‘Enlightenment reveals Emptiness underlying all phenomena.’ Other mystic claims are much more concrete. At the far extreme, we find putative “reports” of personal experience, reports that are roughly parallel to a (sense-mediated) “observation claim,” e.g. ‘I feel God

embracing me now.’

Mystic reports, like sense observation claims, seem to be *prima facie* justified in virtue of the accompanying experience. And unless we have some good reason to doubt what someone says he claims seeing, hearing, etc., the justification provided by the perceptual event is not overridden, and the observation claim stands. Of course, many circumstances invite the application of ‘overriders,’ and though on the face of it justified, a perceptual claim is *ruled out* by something else known. (A child who asks where the sun goes when it ‘goes down,’ is ripe for an astronomy lesson.) In some cases, we have strong corroboration: I see my glasses on the table right where I remember leaving them, after having heard my wife say where they are. In other cases, we have to be reminded that things are not as they seem. (On automobile side mirrors there is sometimes imprinted, ‘Objects are closer than they appear.’) Mystic reports are similarly *prima facie* warranted only and are subject to being overridden. By what then, and under what circumstances would they be defeated—or be corroborated, or simply stand as unchallenged?

Appeals to overrider systems concerning the mystical are much more problematic than with perceptual events because there are no widely accepted views about the nature of what in general they reveal or about the principles of how they reveal it. The types and levels of corroboration that Murphy finds fall short of a ‘perennial philosophy’ of the spiritual complete with an overrider system. Indeed, mystics typically express their views within the interlocking terms of a particular religious tradition, and each tradition touts its own criteria for what counts as a veritable revelation, in some instances vilifying the criteria espoused by rival sects. The fact is that in the world’s religious traditions even boiled down to mystic writings there are in addition to the common points Murphy finds many outright contradictions (p and $(p \rightarrow \bar{q})$ according to one and q and $(q \rightarrow \bar{p})$ with the other). Since the different traditions present different overrider systems, I feel that the conflicts are ‘meta’-overriders, bringing into question all traditional sets of overriders. In other words, mystic claims typically presuppose the truth of what can only be deemed highly abstract theories, and these claims are thus at best ‘high-tier’ interpretations of the experience. The diversity of interpretations in turn, and especially the conflicts, give us reason to be dubious about all the traditional belief systems. However, this need not be the case with a newly formulated and suitably qualified set of mystical claims, a set suitably framed according to a modern global awareness—such as perhaps Michael Murphy would provide in his proposal of a ‘supernature.’

In spite of the considerable conflicts and outright contradictions among the world’s religious views and even among veritable mystic claims, the great adepts in transformative disciplines provide us with good reasons to believe that there is something ‘divine’ or ‘spiritual’ standing in a complex relation with ourselves and our world. And to characterize this as a ‘supernature’ seems to me a legitimate first step as investigation and theorizing about it proceeds. There are several respects in which this particular concept of Murphy’s is weak and where surely we have to go beyond his proposals. Nevertheless, the concurrences in

mystic reports, and indeed the interesting overlaps in interpretive schemes among mysticisms worldwide (even beyond what Murphy has identified), all reinforced by the non-mystical evidence of metanormal capacities from parapsychology and elsewhere, neutralize the objection based on the apparent incompatibilities of doctrine and mean that the declarations of some of the first-person reports are not to be rejected wholesale but only reformulated and revised. Why should not abstractions be found that are appropriate and generalizations not overexalting any particular revelatory occurrence (the most apparent fault of the traditional views)? These might unify and harmonize claims of diverse traditions. The question here is whether Murphy has provided the broad outline of such a globalist view. About this I have some doubts, although, let me stress, it does seem to me that his “supernature” concept if sharpened might prove a powerful interpretive tool.

4. Religious and traditional understandings of transformative practices and the special powers

So far we have found merit both in Murphy’s abstracting from historical contexts and in his “superagency” concept. Let us look at these moves now in somewhat wider lights. The research and reports that Murphy reproduces in Part Two of his book reveal (I take it) that the persons who have exhibited the special powers etc. to the highest degree, best integrating them into their everyday lives, have in the past usually flourished within a religious context or that of a mystical sect (or so at least Murphy intimates in Part One). But apart from the “superagency” and “supernature” talk, religious and mystic philosophies are given short shrift in Part One when Murphy is sketching the broad lines of his study and interpretation. Further, this talk itself remains very vague. The loudest “resonances” that Murphy hears with his central thesis of personal transformation come from a motley group of predominantly secular philosophers of the last two centuries, specifically in various counterproposals made to a materialist view of evolution and objections to a materialist metaphysics. I am not surprised that Murphy finds affinities in this group. I am surprised by the neglect of spiritual philosophies and systems that have been used in religious and mystical contexts to interpret certain valued experiences and psychic phenomena and to encourage their pursuit. After all, such encouragement is what Murphy says he is trying foremost to accomplish. Instead, he turns a cold eye on the traditional understandings, proposing pointblank to “reinterpret religious phenomena from an evolutionary perspective.” Apart from his “superagencies” and “supernature” abstraction, he seems entirely willing to give up square miles of the intellectual content of the traditions in which these have appeared. This may well be at bottommost the right approach: Murphy intends to be non-parochial and “objective” in the spirit of science, and it would permit, as we have noted, avoiding or even resolving conflicts among the traditional systems. But is it legitimate to be selective in precisely Murphy’s fashion, and may Murphy legitimately appropriate all religious mysticism into an “evolutionary”

scheme, albeit one including “superagencies?”

Numerous issues and problems arise in fact with Murphy’s effort to “reinterpret religious phenomena” in the way that he tries; there is a flourishing cottage industry within the philosophy of religion grinding its mills on the grist of comparative and holistic endeavors. But the concept of a “supernature” again seems central because of the unifying work it would do. Yet unfortunately here Murphy has too little to say. Perhaps his corroborations and accommodations of mystic diversity have not been paid for entirely.

Murphy does see that “the relation between nature and supernature” as he says is an intellectual problem that, given his incorporation of “religious phenomena” into the possibility of metanormal embodiment, needs elaboration. (As indicated in our previous discussion, by ‘supernature’ Murphy appears to lump together numerous doctrines of a “supreme” or “transcendent” or “most real” found in the worldwide history of religion.) Then he turns only to the group of philosophers I mentioned for ideas that “illumine” this crucial relation: “five set of ideas,” *Aufhebung*, panpsychism, involution, and two others, putatively help us to see the supernature’s relation to our world. (Why five instead of four or thirty-four?) One starts with the claims of the mystics to motivate some idea of “superagencies” and the rest, but then one turns to this group of philosophers for the right interpretation of what the mystics discovered. However first of all, it is not clear that these ideas, fully articulated, would all be compatible, the “involution” theories of Henry James Sr. and Aurobindo together with the “emergence” view of Ernest Nagel, for example. Furthermore, as I have already pointed out, Murphy does not elaborate these ideas in the context of a single coherent philosophy but only as parts of roughly drawn “maps,” the “legend” part it would seem, maps for transformative practices that are, he suggests, presumably to be thoroughly revised (as the practices and resultant powers become more widespread and integrated into everyday life). Though Murphy brings his five sets of ideas into relation around his theses of personal transformation and an evolutionary jump, the view remains far too vague and it is difficult to see at all precisely what must be the case if such transformation or evolution are really possible *or* even what Murphy *thinks* is required, beyond some kind of “spiritual transcendence” (excuse me for being similarly vague). To be fair, Murphy wants to view this “supernature” specifically as what undergirds a *telos* of personal transformation in accord with his collection of data about extraordinary personal capacities. And frankly, I think that this is not altogether a bad move. But it needs to be made surrounded by a fuller story. Why should the possibility of an “evolutionary transcendence” be built into the fundamental nature or supernature of things? What is it about nature or supernature that requires it? Just what one should believe in any detail about all this, Murphy does not say. There has to be accomplished much more than what Murphy has done for some of his proposals to fly.

For example, how is reincarnation possible or any personal survival? Murphy makes many gestures in the direction of this, and rehearses the weighty evidence of corroborative reports of near-death experiences. But he does not try

to relate a view of personal survival to an understanding of a supernature (at least not in the draft that I have seen including all of Part One), except again very vaguely. Note that the traditional belief systems that have supported transformative practices have had usually quite detailed theories about this.

To illustrate the failing with a more central example: Murphy apparently is not much at all worried about the relation of personal volition to nature and supernature, whereas the transformative practices described in Part Three (several chapters of which I have seen in draft) presuppose a variety of views about personal effort, grace, and natural desires in relation. Rightly he points out that many mystical traditions organize their understandings of personal discipline or practice around a notion of a *telos* of personal transformation. But the traditional goals of “enlightenment,” “liberation,” sainthood, and the like are diversely conceived, and Murphy does not in my judgment make the case that needs to be made to justify their assimilation. Some type of universalist case, I am inclined to think, can be made. But Murphy has not made it, not at the “supernature” level of generality.

However, let me hasten to add that the “mapping” that Murphy uses to organize his data is not for this reason vitiated. There may be a degree of unjustified shaping by such higher order ideas as that of an underlying “supernature” that are not fully worked out. Moreover, recent reclassifications within zoology and botany on the basis of genetic discoveries (as opposed to similarities in macro characteristics) show us again that not even elementary sortings are immune from revision as we learn more. But Murphy’s categorizing has considerable merit just for the neat pattern of its slice: nature seems “cut at the joints” as it were; continuities with powers and capacities that have already emerged are drawn out. And Murphy’s use of evolutionary theory *does* integrate to some extent the sorting with that larger, well-established area of science. Also, he would be the first to admit well-conceived revisions since—let me come back to this point—his central concern is real normalization of the metanormal and his attitude toward its intellectual comprehension is pragmatic.

Nor is the evidence that Murphy has gathered to be much depreciated by his failure to work out what most generally it is evidence for: I am convinced that a variety of supernormal powers and phenomena occur and that there is no reason to suppose that they might not be by almost anyone (with effort and under certain conditions, some of them “supernatural”) developed and even integrated into everyday life. But without further explanation of in particular “supernature” and the modes of its revealing and its affects on the processes of our material world, we cannot help but be unswayed by some of Murphy’s contentions—including that of an imminent normalization of the “metanormal”—and perplexed by his higher order suggestions.

The consummate issue with Michael’s Murphy’s proposals seems to me to be an empirical question about the importance of intellectual understanding to the success of transformative practice. In the past, many of those possessing the *charisms* or *siddhis* Murphy lists have wholeheartedly subscribed to a complex view of God or Brahman or a Vibrant Void in relation to us and our world. Such

intellectual commitment would seem to reinforce the will, and in a real sense to have made possible many of the transformations that Murphy reports. Without such commitment, how many would actually be capable of carrying out the practices that constitute or lead to metanormal embodiment? Without the traditional props of unflinching religious faith, how many would be capable of the feats of a Ramakrishna, a Jacob Atabet, or a Dogen? Without a wider view showing that it is practically imperative to strive for such transformation, is it likely that many would ever be sufficiently diligent? Indeed, the extreme difficulty of the practices would seem to suggest that, contrary to Murphy's hope, any integral embodiment should remain a rare occurrence. (For every successful yogi I would bet there are hundreds stuck somewhere on a "path.") Thus skepticism about grand explanations, religious and otherwise, reinforcing a pluralism about values may well be a serious block in our day to the normalization of the metanormal, and Murphy may well be right to try to shore up an intellectual faith that metanormal embodiment is not just fancy. However, for many of us, I dare say, seeing this as a real opportunity would not be enough. We would have to see it as within a relatively easy grasp, and mystical traditions at least would suggest the opposite, a difficult and treacherous path.

Finally, to be entirely cogent that the metanormal is indeed any opportunity at all, I conclude from Murphy's work, is also not easily accomplished. Michael Murphy has nevertheless made in Part One of his book some significant steps toward that end. The massive collection of data and reports in Part Two do, I take it, suggest much that is at the heart of his proposals.

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