

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Final Choice: Death or Transcendence?** by Michael Grosso. Hove, UK: White Crow Books, 2017. 208 pp. \$15.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-78677-029-5.

“In reality, there are no final choices,” says academic philosopher Michael Grosso, author of *The Final Choice*. “As long as we are conscious beings we are free to keep making new and hopefully better choices” (p. xiii). With this up-front qualification, Grosso embarks on an inspiring examination of *how* we might make new and better choices as a species, and *why* it is imperative for us to do so if we are to survive and thrive.

Here is the motif that informs Grosso’s narrative in *The Final Choice*:

What at bottom drives all living things? The goal of life seems to be more life, self-replication with infinite variations. . . . The tendency among mammals, and humans in particular, is toward greater mobility, freedom and detachment from the environment. Human life is especially mobile and already has begun to move beyond the planetary habitat to explore outer space habitats. If the goal of life is more life—in a word, survival—the function of our nonphysical psychic potential may be to mediate survival of bodily death. . . . If the goal of life is more life, higher, freer, more complex forms of life, then our psychic potentials represent the power of life transcending its biological template. Psi is the wedge of life driving against the constraints of physical reality, against the boundaries of time and space. Psi is the medium in which new forms of life carry us beyond the boundaries of physical environment. (p. 11)

Grosso considers the near-death experience (NDE) as “perhaps the most important psychological phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as shocking and counterintuitive as quantum mechanics. . . .” He adds, “We have millions of repetitions of the near-death experience . . . and can study and analyze it with the tools of science and other intellectual disciplines. The NDE experientially provides access to a greater mental, indeed *spiritual* sphere of being” (p. xii).

Grosso raises the possibility that, with environmental collapse now in sight, a global version of a near-death experience may be forming, analogous to a human approaching death. It’s the sort of thing one might predict from the life force, whose evolutionary vector is toward more life, more survival, a future. And just as individual NDEs result in a radical

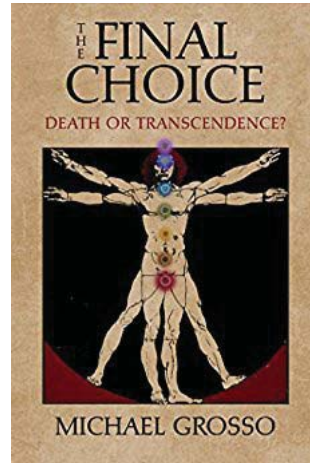
transformation and reorientation of the person undergoing them, our planetary citizenry, en masse, may similarly change channels in our priorities, values, and how we live our lives. If so, we just might squeak by. (I'm reminded of a hallway conversation I once had with the late physicist David Bohm. I asked him his opinion of the future of humankind: "Do you think we'll make it?" He paused, thinking intently, then said, "Yes. Barely.")

Grosso's stated goal in *The Final Choice* is "to create a new, fact-based mythology of transcendence." For him, this entails two aspects of transcendence: "the survival of consciousness after death and, no less momentous, the idea of an extended *transpersonal* mind. Pim van Lommel (2010) calls it 'endless consciousness' or following the Upanishads, Erwin Schrödinger (1983) referred to the *one mind*. Later, Larry Dossey (2013) coined the phrase 'nonlocal mind' and has described in detail how we can make sense of being part of the one mind in his book of that title" (pp. xi–xii). (Full disclosure: whether Grosso's favorable nod to my work influences this review is for the reader to decide.)

Grosso employs a *nonlocal* model of consciousness—consciousness that is not localized or confined to specific points in space, such as brains or bodies, nor to specific points in time, such as the present. Nonlocal mind is Mind at Large, as Aldous Huxley and others have called it. Survival follows, because mind that is boundless or nonlocal with respect to time is seemingly eternal or immortal; and mind nonlocal or boundless with respect to space is omnipresent. So the critical question becomes: What is the evidence that mind is nonlocal? Grosso shows how consciousness variously manifests nonlocally, making the case for Mind at Large, a universal or unitary mind of which each individual mind is a part.

Grosso wrote the first edition of *The Final Choice* in 1985. This revised edition takes into account a plethora of findings by consciousness researchers who have emerged in the three decades separating the two editions.

When the first edition of *The Final Choice* was published in 1985, the fear of nuclear war was palpable worldwide. Grosso points out that in Russia, at that time, Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (removal of barriers) lay in the future. The Berlin Wall and communism seemed permanent fixtures, and mutually assured destruction (MAD) was a strategic principle among the great powers. Here's how Grosso appraised



this planetary situation and how he responded to it:

I looked around at our fear-and-greed driven world and thought that maybe something like the near-death experience could be the template for the needed transformation.

I found it helpful as a model for speculating on what might happen to consciousness in the event of a near or actual global disaster.

The question I kept asking: Are we approaching a time when events of such enormous proportions may jolt the collective consciousness into new forms of awareness, perhaps a more vivid sense of human solidarity?

As to my aim in this book: Evidence exists of an array of extended human capacities—intellectual, moral, aesthetic, mystical, and superphysical. In the interests of life at large, we need to focus on the skills and rich potentials that human beings possess and think of new ways of mobilizing their creative uses. The times seem ripe for a new Manhattan Project about harnessing and our neglected human potentials.

There are times of crisis and transition when breakthroughs to a larger frame of reference, a new take on reality itself, can slip into focus, become viable, even inevitable. The discontents of civilization are finding their voices. Instability is magnified by information and communication technologies operating 24/7. . . .

We live in a strange time. Our fellows have unleashed destructive forces infinitely disproportionate to the moral IQ of the species. Nine nations on earth possess about 15 thousand nuclear weapons, most belonging to the United States and Russia. Such power in the employ of small groups of men or women of dubious mental and moral capacity is an unsettling thought. (pp. xii–xiii)

Grosso has long been one of our keenest science watchers. He has contributed to recent works examining the shortcomings of materialism, such as the seminal *Irreducible Mind* by Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, and others (2007). His concerns encompass one of the strangest twists and turns in our era: how materialistic science, which largely views itself triumphant in the search for knowledge, has sacrificed our own consciousness on the altar of materialism.

The overwhelming consensus among biologists and neuroscientists is that our brain somehow produces consciousness, although there are no adequate explanations how this could possibly be true. The logical consequence is that when our brain and body die, our mind or consciousness is totally annihilated. Other casualties occur before physical death. These include any deep sense of meaning, purpose, or direction to our existence. As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg (1993) has said, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.” If consciousness results from the swarms of subatomic particles comprising

a physical brain, many see *self*-consciousness as merely an illusion. As philosopher Daniel Dennett (1992) asserts, “We’re all zombies. Nobody is conscious.” Of course, not everyone agrees with these presumptuous assertions. As philosopher Galen Strawson (2006) says, “This particular denial is the strangest thing that has ever happened in the whole history of human thought.” And computer scientist Bernardo Kastrup (2015) states, “Here we have consciousness trying to trick consciousness into believing that it doesn’t exist.”

However, against the materialist backdrop all talk of the survival of consciousness beyond physical death—Grosso’s position—is widely viewed as a cowardly conceit stoked by primitive fears of extinction. No paid-up scientist, it is often said, should take seriously any hint of transcendence. Rather, better to keep a courageous, stiff upper lip in the face of impending death. As Lord Bertrand Russell (1997) said, “I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. . . . I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation.”

Against this tide of materialism, Grosso explores the mythical, historical, and modern attitudes toward death and the evidence for our possible survival. Those who expect a gee-whiz, wide-eyed, new-age treatment of these issues will have to go elsewhere. Grosso carefully examines the major sides of the survival question. He considers the closed-mindedness of committed materialists toward survival as a dead-end. It is rare, he states, to find any skeptic of survival who has even read the relevant research in areas such as near-death experiences, telepathy, clairvoyance, remote viewing, precognition, and psychokinesis. For Grosso, these issues are not just academic. He acknowledges that personal experiences have made him “naturally more receptive to other people’s initially queer-sounding stories,” which range “from precognition to being physically attacked by a ghost in a haunted house” (p. xi–xii).

Good news: Grosso’s concern for our current dilemmas on this planet are catching. They are increasingly shared by thoughtful people in a variety of disciplines. One example from the diplomatic world will make the point.

Vaclav Havel (1990), the author, poet, and playwright who was the first president of the Czech Republic, saw a hell looming in our world and had the guts to say so on the international stage. As a solution, he endorsed a collective entry into a One-Mind type of awareness he called “responsibility to something higher.” As he said in a speech delivered to a joint meeting of the United States Congress on February 21, 1990:

Consciousness precedes Being, and not the other way around . . . for this reason, the salvation in this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart. . . . Without a global revolution in the sphere of human con-

sciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable. If we are no longer threatened by world war or by the danger that the absurd mountains of accumulated nuclear weapons might blow up the world, this does not mean that we have definitely won. We are still capable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success—responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged.

In a subsequent speech in 1994 at Independence Hall in Philadelphia titled “The Need for Transcendence”—Grosso’s theme—Havel spoke of a unified humanity held together by a state of consciousness he called “transcendence”:

[I]n today’s multicultural world, the truly reliable path to coexistence, to peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation, must start from what is at the root of all cultures and what lies infinitely deeper in human hearts and minds than political opinion, convictions, antipathies, or sympathies—it must be rooted in self-transcendence: Transcendence as a hand reached out to those close to us, to foreigners, to the human community, to all living creatures, to nature, to the universe. Transcendence as a deeply and joyously experienced need to be in harmony even with what we ourselves are not, what we do not understand, what seems distant from us in time and space, but with which we are nevertheless mysteriously linked because, together with us, all this constitutes a single world. *Transcendence as the only real alternative to extinction* (emphasis added).

I personally find immense hope in Michael Grosso’s book. And I am pleased to report that his views are buttressed by many scientifically oriented physicians, some of whom who are my professional colleagues. I could cite many examples, but one shall suffice: the late physician Lewis Thomas (1913–1993). Thomas was dean of New York University Medical School and Yale School of Medicine and, later, director of research and president of the Sloan Kettering Institute in New York, now Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Thomas was a no-nonsense physician and a hard-core researcher. Among the things he questioned was the destiny of consciousness following bodily death. In his 1974 award-winning book of essays, *The Lives of a Cell*, he wrote:

There is still that permanent vanishing of consciousness to be accounted for. Are we to be stuck forever with this problem? Where on Earth does it go? Is it simply stopped dead in its tracks, lost in humans, wasted? Considering

the tendency of nature to find uses for complex and intricate mechanisms, this seems to me unnatural. I prefer to think of it somehow as separated off at the filaments of its attachment, and drawn like an easy breath back into the membrane of its origin, a fresh memory for a biophysical nervous system. . . . (Thomas 1974)

Grosso's lively explorations of the various ways in which the life force "at bottom drives all living things" is of crucial importance for every human being. But will the life force be thwarted by the lagging "moral IQ of the species"? Will it be neutralized by some innate, unconscious, species-wide death wish or *thanatos*? That is the question with which Grosso leaves us.

Reviewers are obliged by custom to say something negative to demonstrate objectivity. Here it is: Although the book contains a glossary and an excellent list of references, it could benefit from an index.

*The Final Choice* is a deep literary dive, a rousing read appropriate for scholars and laypersons alike. I cannot imagine a book more relevant to the interests and personal quests of most members of the Society for Scientific Exploration and readers of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*. I hope *The Final Choice* achieves wide readership—for all our sakes.

But if you are negatively disposed toward Grosso's arguments and find the case for the survival of bodily death unconvincing or impossible, perhaps you might consider the observation of Nobel Prize-winning scientist Charles Richet: "I never said it was possible. I only said it was true."

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