

Toward a Natural History of Supernormal Attributes

Michael Murphy

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Article

Since the early nineteenth century, a "natural history of supernormal human attributes" has been tentatively forming. Its contributors have included the German and British mesmerists such as Justinus Kerner and James Esdaille; Frederic Myers and other psychical researchers, pioneering psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and William James, and religious scholars who have studied the siddhis of Hindu-Buddhist lore, the charisms of Roman Catholic mystics, and the "adornments" of Sufi ecstasies. Its methods include the collection and comparative analysis of supernormal experiences from different cultures and fields of human activity, and it is conducted with sympathetic yet critical detachment from various claims, dogmas, and institutional commitments related to the phenomena it embraces. This field has not coalesced, however, into a widely recognized science. It has no over-arching associations, publications, or generally accepted canons, and for that reason many of its discoveries have been neglected or lost.

In the spirit of this still-nascent natural history, the Esalen Institute developed an archive of some 10,000 studies that is now housed at the Stanford University School of Medicine. In his book *The Future of the Body*, which was based in part on the materials contained in the Esalen archive, Michael Murphy proposed a classification of supernormal experiences based on the idea that most, if not all of them express or point toward further evolutionary developments of the basic capacities and bodily structures we have inherited from our animal ancestors.

In *The Future of the Body*, Murphy divided such attributes into these twelve groups: perceptual abilities, kinesthetic awareness and self-regulation, communication abilities, vitality, movement abilities, abilities to alter the environment, capacities for pain and pleasure, cognition, volition, sense of self, love, and bodily structures and processes. Recently he has added memory to this list as a thirteenth attribute, and through the research proposed here will eventually add more. This is a preliminary classification, but the principle on which it is based is more and more compelling to Murphy and others involved in the Esalen research. To state it again: most, if not all instances of supernormality can be classified according to their expression of common human attributes inherited from our animal ancestors. Shamanic powers, the siddhis of Hindu-Buddhist lore, the charisms of Roman Catholic sanctity, the "adornments" of Sufism, and the countless examples of extraordinary functioning studied by modern scientists, in Murphy's proposal, are developing attributes, the emerging limbs and organs as it were, of our evolving human nature.

So what do we get from such a move? What useful things does a cross-matrix of this kind provide us?

First, it brings order to an often-bewildering array of human phenomena, revealing what may be the most fundamental pattern that connects them. In so doing, it shows the close similarity, or identity, of certain experiences that for various reasons seem unconnected. For example, the

kundalini of Hindu-Buddhist lore, the "boiling n/um" of Kalahari busmen, the *incendium amoris* of Catholic saints, the *tumo* of Tibetan yogis, the "magical heat" of stone age shamans, and the supernormal energy of some modern athletes can through the lens of this grouping be recognized as slightly different expressions of the same supernormal vitality which in turn can be viewed as a further development of the warm-blooded freedom from environmental vicissitudes that appeared in the evolution of birds and mammals.

Second, like the table of physical elements, it can guide us toward little appreciated, or as yet undiscovered, kinds of supernormal attribute. It led Murphy, for example, to look for supernormal movement abilities among religious adepts and thus discover a little-known Catholic charism called "ecstatic walking" that closely resembles the extraordinary locomotion of Tibetan yogis resulting from *lung-gom* training; and it has led him to explore the close similarities of extraordinary memory abilities exhibited in both modern and ancient times. In this comparative analysis, such a cross-matrix helps us identify family resemblances among phenomena that occur in different cultures, or that have been given different names within the same culture, or that for some other reason are not thought to be the same sort of experience.

Third, it warns us against limited conceptions of our possible development and highest good, including some that are embedded in philosophies and religions we honor. With the broad inventory of human potentialities it provides, we can develop an understanding of human nature that more adequately reflects our possibilities for further advance. In short, if all our attributes give rise to extraordinary versions of themselves, it becomes evident that our entire human nature shares an evolutionary telos, or drive toward greater life. All of our parts, it seems, are capable of--and perhaps secretly predisposed toward--a richer existence.

Fourth, by helping to reveal the all-encompassing nature of our potential for greater life, this classificatory scheme helps account for the fact that supernormal attributes tend to appear in clusters, even in people who do not seek, expect, or work to attain them. It would help explain, for example, why contemporary athletes sometimes experience quasi-mystical perceptions and illuminations in sport even when they have no context for them, or why certain yogis exhibit extraordinary bodily powers even though their discipline aims at release from embodiment.

Fifth, it would help us understand various synergies of transformative practice and the lasting witness in most sacred traditions to an integral embrace of body, mind, heart, and soul. Extraordinary capacities emerge in clusters, perhaps, because we are attracted, consciously or not, toward a many-sided realization of them. We want to experience different kinds of supernormal functioning because they are latent in us and--if we choose to think metaphysically--because all the divinity in us wants to find expression in this ever-evolving world.

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