
Book Review:
***Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality:
A Postmodern Exploration.***

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A review of *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration*, by David Ray Griffin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. Pp.292+notes £15.50 pbk. ISBN 0-7914-3316-1, LC 96-21472..

The title of this book is wide-ranging. However, although the book's scope is indeed broad, its content differs from its title. Strictly speaking, the book has only a little emphasis on parapsychology. Indeed, the author himself notes that by 'parapsychology' he really means what is usually termed as 'psychical research'. As a result, most of the emphasis is on spontaneous cases (albeit the more well-researched examples). Moreover, his focus in Chapters 4-8 is on psychical research's prime territory – the question of survival after bodily death.

The subtitle is also a little misleading. The book is only secondarily a *postmodern* exploration. From the subtitle one might have expected Griffin's book to be one in which psychical research is interpreted in the light of current postmodern thought. Instead, the postmodern aspect is brought to light only in the very last chapter and almost as an afterthought. There is no reference to any contemporary postmodern philosophers in the book at all (although it is noted in the Introduction that the term 'postmodern' can mean many things).

Similarly, the use of the word 'spirituality' in the very title of the book is surprising when it becomes a topic only in the final chapter. The overall impression – perhaps not surprisingly – is that the title was chosen to sell the book rather than to reflect its content.

In reality the book is an attempt both to show how Whitehead's process philosophy overcomes many of the problems inherent in the philosophy of mind and how it can accommodate the phenomena from psychical research. The latter half of the book assesses whether or not there is any good reason to think that survival of bodily death may be possible. Griffin takes many different types of evidence (e.g., evidence for reincarnation, apparitions etc.), discusses whether they necessarily imply survival of death and then tries to explain them according to a Whiteheadian metaphysics. As a whole the book is a mixture of philosophical reasoning and of case studies in psychical research.

The main philosophical content of the book is located in Chapters 1, 3 and 9. In the first chapter Griffin gives a historical overview as to how paranormal phenomena came to be dismissed by the contemporary materialistic worldview. He then claims that there are three basic types of people. There are paradigmatic thinkers (who think in terms of worldviews), data-led thinkers (such as scientists) and wishful thinkers (who are led by what they want to be the case). Most people are a mixture of these. He argues that paranormal phenomena do not fit into the current worldview and that a shift in worldview is necessary.

The terminology in the chapter is sometimes a little too enthusiastic. For example, he describes the evidence for

paranormal functioning as 'overwhelming' and yet, given the continued controversy over the data — including controversy about some of the examples he actually cites — it evidently cannot be overwhelming in fact. It is hard to say whether others are too fearful or whether Griffin is too wishful, but fortunately in the rest of the book Griffin tries to persuade paradigmatic thinkers first and foremost with additional arguments for those who are data-led.

The third chapter is probably the one that is most based in traditional philosophical debates. Here Griffin discusses problems that arise if one holds a dualistic understanding of the mind-body problem (i.e., that the mind is a non-material thing in a material body); problems that a materialistic view of the mind (i.e., that the mind is a material thing identical with the brain) has to answer; and the problems that both dualism and materialism share. Griffin argues that if one adopts a panpsychic or 'panexperientialist' (Griffin's term) view — i.e., the idea that all individuals enjoy experience — then all of the problems connected to dualism and materialism fall aside. The panexperientialism that Griffin holds is a Whiteheadian one.

Griffin explains Whitehead's notion of 'prehension' which is a form of nonsensory perception. Examples of prehension would be the fact that we know that there is an external world and that values (such as goodness, beauty etc.) exist. Neither of these pieces of knowledge can be gained purely through sensory perception. Griffin argues that once we accept the notion of prehension, then we can also accept the possibility of extra-sensory perception. Moreover, if prehension is possible, then life after bodily death is likewise a possibility. Perception is now no longer limited to what the materialistic worldview permits.

This chapter covers a lot of ground in a short space, so readers should not expect to receive a full insight into the many issues that plague the philosophy of mind. Instead, the chapter serves best as a summary of some of the main problems involved. It also serves as a springboard for

further reading, criticism and thought. Moreover, even though the chapter is clearly written, given the shortage of space some of the Whiteheadian terminology necessarily remains a little unclear (such as what precisely constitutes a 'dominant individual' and how to assess whether something has a 'self-determining response to the environment').

The final chapter explains that the approach taken in the book is a postmodern one because it breaks down the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. The main aim of the chapter is to take various assumptions that underlie the idea that life is a spiritual journey and to show how paranormal phenomena support these assumptions. Griffin sees the term 'spirituality' as reflecting the idea of a non-institutionalised religion. He ends by claiming that if life is a spiritual journey, then there must also be life after death.

The rest of Griffin's book is far more devoted to giving examples from parapsychology and from psychical research to help data-led thinkers rethink their perspective. The philosophical chapters are primarily given for the benefit of the paradigmatic thinkers.

The second chapter is the first one to discuss evidence for the paranormal and its focus is on the notion of repeatability. The four types of replicability that Griffin cites are those of i) laboratory experiments; ii) spontaneous events; iii) subjects in tightly controlled conditions; and iv) subject population with belief in the paranormal. As regards this last point, Griffin notes that many sceptics believe that only those with deficient intelligence accept the paranormal. However, he says, many people of exceptional calibre have expressed publicly their belief in paranormal events. Given that Griffin makes this point here, it might have been best for him not to have made the same point in the previous chapter (e.g., p.13, p.24) by listing various impressive names. Unfortunately, the overall impression is that Griffin is arguing from authority (and sceptics are always keen to remark that someone who excels in one subject does not

necessarily excel at detecting fraud in parapsychology). Similarly, a more extended discussion of the various issues involved may have provoked more interest. For instance, no mention is made of alternative interpretations of the results from micro-PK experiments (e.g., that they could just be due to selecting precognitively the appropriate group of data points) and that some people therefore doubt the existence of PK. Consequently, it appears that because the author has a point of view to argue (in which PK is possible but precognition is not), only the appropriate information for that point of view is given. A more balanced approach may have been more persuasive.

Chapters 4-8 all assess the evidence for life after death. The topics in turn are: mediumistic messages; possession; reincarnation; apparitions; and OBEs. These chapters follow on directly from the conclusion in Chapter 3 that a Whiteheadian metaphysics suggests that life after death may be possible, but that it is by no means necessary (either for parapsychology or for Whitehead). Thus the aim of the second half of the book is to see whether survival of bodily death is required by the available data. Each of the following four chapters begins with a short justification for taking seriously the evidence to be presented. They then provide the strongest cases for the phenomenon in question (e.g., mediumship) and they subsequently discuss whether this evidence must be taken as evidence for postmortem survival.

For most of this evidence Griffin brings forward his own theory of 'retroprehensive inclusion' as an alternative to the survival hypothesis. This theory is similar to the superpsi hypothesis. With retroprehensive inclusion, though, a person can prehend experiences of others as if they were their own experiences. Retroprehensive inclusion thus has the advantage over superpsi, because it enables a far more accurate acquisition of information than is generally thought possible even through superpsi. Griffin believes that virtually all the cases outlined in chapters 4-8 could theoretically be explained by retroprehensive inclusion,

but not without some problems. For example, he notes that retroprehensive inclusion suggests that a past personality could be reincarnated by more than one person and yet the evidence does not appear to point in this direction. His overall conclusion from these chapters is that although the theory of retroprehensive inclusion can be invoked to explain the phenomena, the survivalist interpretation is nevertheless the most likely.

There seems to be some inconsistency in these chapters as to what Griffin will regard as the 'boggle factor' in respect of superpsi. In chapter 8 he appears somewhat dismissive of the possibility of super clairvoyance to explain OBEs, but in previous chapters he seems to accept this possibility in a quite radical form. It is also difficult to see how retroprehensive inclusion is compatible with a dualism that is not an ontological one — that is, retroprehensive inclusion seems to suppose (contrary to Griffin's stated position) that the mind or soul is distinct in kind from the body.

Nevertheless, these criticisms should not take away the value of these chapters for those interested in the question of survival of bodily death. The careful assessment of the evidence and of the theory under consideration certainly illustrates very well the complexity underlying any interpretation of the evidence.

Griffin's book is clearly written. However, it would have benefited from being structured more closely as a book on the problems that confront philosophers and psychical researchers when they consider the possibility of postmortem survival. Even the initial chapters are ultimately directed towards laying the groundwork for the issues that need to be considered. Instead Griffin spreads his net a little too wide — wishing also to validate parapsychology in the eyes of academics and to construct his own worldview as the new paradigm. This is just too large a scope for one book; chapter 3 alone had enough material for an entire volume (although Griffin does refer to other works of his that address many of the issues).

Griffin clearly hopes that the book will encourage other academics to look at the existing evidence for the paranormal. Although I share this hope, the project is one that needs its own separate book with a more thorough assessment both of the evidence and (for philosophers) of the sheer difficulty of the philosophical issues involved. Nevertheless, the book is informative, it provides a good assessment of the survival issue and it raises other interesting questions that, by the very fact of their sketchiness, provoke the reader to think. I,

like Griffin (presumably), hope that readers will be inspired.

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