

Is There Life After Death?

A review essay of James and Whitehead on Life after Death by David Ray Griffin

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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David Ray Griffin has passed away.

His commitment to 9/11 Truth will prevail.

His Legacy will Live.

This review article by Edward Curtin pertaining to DRG’s book was first published by Global Research on June 15, 2022

Life is entwined with death from the start, for death is the price we must pay for being born, even though we don’t choose it, which may be why some people who are very angry at the deal, decide to choose how and when they will die, as if they are getting revenge on someone who dealt them a rotten hand, even if they don’t believe in the someone.

The meaning of death, and whether humans do or do not survive it in some form, has always obsessed people, from the average person to the great artists and thinkers. Death is the mother of philosophy and all the arts and sciences. It is arguably also what motivates so much human behavior, from keeping busy to waging war to trying to hit a little white ball with a long stick down a lot of grass into a hole in the ground and doing it again and again.

Death is the mother of distractions.

It is also what we cannot ultimately control, although a lot of violent and crazy rich people try. The thought of it drives many people mad.

No one is immune from wondering about it. We are born dying, and from an early age we ask why. Children often explicitly ask, but as they grow older the explicit usually retreats into implicit and avoidance because of adults' need to deny death or their lack of answers about it that makes sense.

David Ray Griffin is not a child or an adult in denial. He has spent his life in an intrepid search for truth in many realms – philosophy, theology, politics, etc. He is an esteemed author of over forty books, an elderly man in his eighties who has spent his life writing about God, and also in the last twenty years a series of outstanding books on the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the demonic nature of U.S. history. He fits T.S Eliot's description in [*The Four Quartets*](#):

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Though the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning

In his latest book, which is another beginning, [*James and Whitehead on Life after Death*](#), he explores the age-old question of whether there is life after death and concludes that there probably is. It is a conclusion that is arguably shared in some way still by many people today but is clearly rejected by most intellectuals and highly schooled people, as Griffin writes:

The traditional basis for hope was belief in life after death. Modern culture, however, has so diminished this belief that today, in educated circles, it is largely assumed that life after death is an outmoded belief....The dominant view among science-based modern intellectuals is that the idea of life after death is not one to take seriously. That conclusion, however, is virtually implicit in the presuppositions of these intellectuals, such as Corliss Lamont. According to these modern intellectuals, there is no non-sensory perception; the world is basically mechanistic; and the world contains nothing but physical bodies and forces.

Griffin argues the opposite. His book is devoted to refuting these presuppositions with the help of William James and Alfred North Whitehead. It is not an easy read, and is not aimed at regular people who would find it rough going, except for the middle chapters on mediums, extrasensory perception, telepathy, apparitions, near-death out-of-body experiences, and reincarnation – the stuff of tabloid nonsense but which in Griffin's scholarly hands is treated very intelligently. Moreover, these chapters are crucial to his overall argument. However, the book will mainly appeal to the intellectuals whom Griffin wishes to convince of their errors, or to those who agree with him. It is scholarly.

Without entering into all the nuances of his rather complicated thesis, I will try to summarize his key points.

Griffin is what is called a process theologian and his work of philosophical theology is intimately linked with scientific thinking and the idea of evolution, even as it rejects the modern mechanistic worldview for a “postmodern” cosmology based on recent science, in particular, the work of microbiology. Although he is a Christian, the present book does not presuppose any Christian beliefs such as revelation, nor, for that matter, specific beliefs of any religion, although he does presuppose (and partially explains in chapter eleven) the existence of a “divine creator” or “divine reality” who is responsible for the evolutionary process that is the expression of a cosmic purpose with the “fine-tuning” of the universe. This “Holy Reality” is important to his argument.

The thought of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead underlies everything Griffin writes here. Whitehead is known as the creator of process philosophy, which, to simplify, is the idea that all reality is not made up of things or bits of inert matter, no matter how small (e.g. atoms, brain molecules) or large (people or trees) interacting in some blind way with other bits of matter, but consists of conscious processes of ongoing experiences. In other words, reality is constant change, flowing experiences with types of awareness and intention and the free creativity to change. Humans are, therefore, ongoing experiments, not static entities.

Following Whitehead, Griffin has coined the term “panexperientialism,” meaning that all reality is comprised of experiences. It is worth noting that the etymology of the words *experience* and *experiment* are the same – Latin, *experiri*, to try. Life is therefore a trying. As some might say, it is trying to be born and to know you will die.

Griffin begins by noting the importance of life after death and why many argue against it. He states how he will avoid many of their objections and how he will show how the valid ones dissolve under his analysis. He promptly writes that “Microbiology has dissolved the mind-body problem.” He bases this on the work of acclaimed evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis,, among others, and her theory of symbiogenesis:

Her theory of symbiogenesis was based on the idea that all living organisms are sentient. Saying that her world view ‘recognizes the perceptive capacity of all live beings,’ she held that ‘consciousness is a property of all living cells,’ even the most elementary ones: ‘Bacteria are conscious. These bacterial beings have been around since the origin of life.’

Margulis’s point is consonant with Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, meaning that all physical reality possesses a degree of perceptive experience, although Griffin says “some of us may prefer to save the term ‘consciousness’ for higher types of experience.” The fundamental point is that all of physical reality experiences, or, as he quotes William James, “is a piece of full experience.” In layman’s language as applied to people, the mind and body are one.

Having laid down this scientific/philosophical foundation in the first four chapters (and in two more detailed appendices), Griffin turns to psychical research and how Whitehead and James believed in the need for such research and how James’s radical empiricism supported the reality of parapsychological events as did Whitehead, who accepted telepathy. Griffin writes:

Like James, Whitehead affirmed the reality of non-sensory perception. Moreover, besides affirming its reality, Whitehead argued that non-sensory perception is

fundamental, so that sensory perception is secondary. Far from being primary, sensory perception is derivative from non-sensory perception....Accordingly, there is nothing supernatural about telepathy; one becomes aware of the content of other minds through the same non-sensory mode of perception that tells us about causation, the real existence of physical objects, memory, and time.

(Let me interject the simple but important point that it follows that in order to have any perceptions one must exist in physical form.)

Turning to actual psychical research that was promoted by the establishment of The Society For Psychical Research (SPR) in London in 1882, Griffin, as previously mentioned, devotes four key chapters to mediums, telepathy, extrasensory perception, near-death out-of-body experiences, apparitions, and reincarnation. This research and its findings, while rejected by the modern scientific worldview, is widespread and quite believable, in various degrees. Griffin shows why this is so. The truth of such psychic experiences is hard to refute since there are so many examples, which Griffin gives. He would agree with James who said:

The concrete evidence for most of the 'psychic' phenomenon under discussion is good enough to hang a man twenty times over.

And James, of course, the longtime professor at Harvard University, is revered as one of the United States' most brilliant thinkers, not a fringe nut-case. This is also true for many of the others Griffin calls on to show how solid is the evidence for much psychic phenomena. Most readers will find these chapters very engaging and the most accessible.

Finally, Griffin explains why the idea of a fine-tuned universe makes the most sense and how it dovetails with the belief in God, even as it runs counter to the mechanistic, materialistic, and atheistic view of many intellectuals. He writes:

The new worldview advocated in this book requires a new understanding of the divine reality. Whitehead and [Charles] Hartshorne [an American process philosopher and theologian who developed Whitehead's work] advocated a view of the universe known as 'panentheism.' The term means 'all-in-God.' Panentheism [the world is in God] is thus distinguished from pantheism, on the one hand, and traditional theism, on the other.

Based on these factors – microbiology, Whitehead and James's philosophy, psychic research, etc. – Griffin concludes that there is ample evidence for life after death, not in the physical sense but in that of psyche or soul or spirit. He says that he has "long believed in life after death," but that in offering this book with his argument for life after death as our "only empirical ground for hope" since we all die, he does so reluctantly. "I suggest this answer with fear and trembling, knowing that most of my friends and other people whose opinions I respect will hate this answer."

That they would be surprised by his conclusion is a bit perplexing since he has long believed in life after death. I surely do not hate his answer and believe that he has made a strong case for his long-held belief. I share it, but differently. And I think that many of his scientifically-oriented friends and others may indeed agree with him more than he thinks, for his argument is rooted, not just in philosophy and theology, but in science. It is based on the idea of the non-duality between mind and matter, with the difference being that for him matter is conscious and for them it is not. They may come to accept the recent findings of

microbiology and reject the “assumption of materialists and dualists alike” that “neurons are insentient.” They may reject some of their own presuppositions. For these debates take place at the highest level of abstraction where intellectuals dwell, and accepting one new scientific paradigm does not necessarily lead to belief in life after death. Far from it. That is when God enters the picture.

Griffin wisely uses hardcore commonsense beliefs to refute dualism and materialism. But I propose that there is another hardcore, commonsense belief that he ignores: that people know and feel that they are flesh and bones. Out of this feeling comes our conceptions about life, not the other way around. The Spanish philosopher Miguel De Unamuno, in *The Tragic Sense of Life*, put it this way:

Our philosophy – that is, our mode of understanding or not understanding the world and life – springs from our feeling toward life itself Man is said to be a reasoning animal. I do not know why he has not been defined as an affective or feeling animal And thus, in a philosopher, what must needs most concern us is the man.

David Griffin, relying on John Cobb’s term, says the “resurrection of the soul” is a better term for life after death than the more traditional ones of “immortality of the soul” and the “resurrection of the body,” since it splits the difference, thereby taking a bit of truth from both terms.

But as I understand his argument in this book, he is doing what he cautions against via Whitehead: “... he [Whitehead] said that one must avoid ‘negations of what in practice is presupposed.’” Griffin’s presupposition is that both dualism and materialism are both wrong and panexperientialism is correct. He writes:

Panexperientialism is based upon the supposition that we can and should think about the units comprising the physical world by analogy with our own experience, which we know from within. The supposition, in other words, is that the apparent difference in kind between our experience, or our ‘mind,’ and the entities comprising our bodies is an illusion, resulting from the fact that we know them in two different ways. We know our minds from within, by identity and memory, whereas in sensory perception of our bodies, as in looking in a mirror, we know them from without. Once we realize this, there is no reason to assume them really to be different in kind. [my emphasis]

So if that is true, I ask this question: why, if body and soul/mind are inseparable and are what people are, why is it necessary to argue for their divorce in death? If God created them as one at birth, could not God recreate them as one in death? Why Griffin concludes that this is impossible or would require a miracle escapes me. Maybe contemplating it is a bit too pedestrian and non-philosophical.

Despite my point above, *James and Whitehead on Life after Death* is another quintessentially brilliant volume from Griffin’s pen. It forces you to think about difficult but essential matters. It may not be easy reading, but it may force you to imaginatively ask yourself, what, if anything were possible and life continued after death, you would want such a life to be like. Maybe the man David Ray Griffin wants it to be non-bodily. Maybe many do and can’t imagine an alternative. But I can, and I hope for bodily resurrection. It’s just what I am.

Philosophy and theology can get very abstract and leave regular people in the dust.

Another poet comes to mind, a counterpoint to T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yates, who wrote in ["An Acre of Green Grass"](#):

Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself I must remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call;

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds;
Forgotten else by mankind,
An old man's eagle mind.

I would love to read what a frenzied David Ray Griffin has to say, now that I have read his philosophical logic. I can't help agreeing with Unamuno:

And thus, in a philosopher, what must needs most concern us is the man

The man of flesh, blood, and bones.

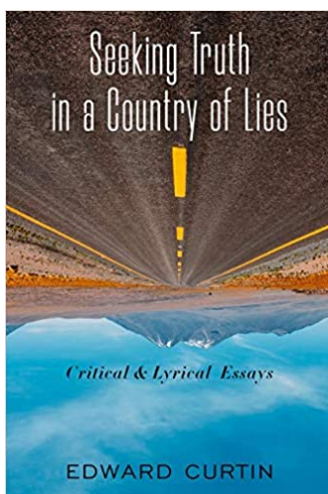
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He is the author of *Seeking the Truth in a Country of Lies*

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