

DO WE SURVIVE OUR BIOLOGICAL DEATH?  
A RATIONAL EXAMINATION

*By Yew-Kwang Ng. Eliva Press. 2024. 219 pp. £21.59.*

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Do we indeed survive bodily death? That is the big question, succinctly put, and this book promises a rational examination, and therefore one hopes a rational answer. Prof. Yew-Kwang Ng would appear to be a Renaissance man, given the scope of his interests and qualifications. Initially trained as an economist, he is now a distinguished fellow of the Economic Society of Australia. However, Ng is also a philosopher, arguing for 'hedonistic altruism'. In addition, he has studied physics. Ng has published some 30 books and 300 papers on subjects besides economics and philosophy, including mathematics, psychology, and biology.

This book is just 180 pages long, including appendices and references, so one can expect a degree of succinctness, which I believe may be a good sign, indicating a mind that can rapidly sort the wheat from the chaff. The chapter headings, and the useful summaries that head them, indicate that many if not all conceivable fields of survival research have been considered. Ng methodically numbers and subdivides paragraphs. He presents the countervailing materialist arguments in a fair-minded way but arguably sometimes incompletely. Unusually for a book on this subject, but as befits a philosopher, he also discusses the consequences of his conclusions.

Ng presents his own theory of not only what underlies psychic phenomena and which he believes may explain satisfactorily at least some of the evidence he presents, but also the origins of the universe and its development. His theory attempts to fuse religion and science, aptly named 'Evolved-God Creationism'. This, of course, by its nature is highly speculative, and Ng gives the impression that he is, modestly, not entirely convinced by his own logic. His philosophical flair, though, is refreshing and indeed necessary, particularly when he discusses epistemology. He presents ideas that capture one's attention but, as with much philosophical discourse, might seem too speculative for those who focus on a purely scientific theorizing.

Ng's starting point is that, though death is conclusive, this does not rule out the continuation of a postulated spirit. He regards spirit as being formed of the mind, rather than the personality, although he does not immediately define the concept of 'mind'. Instead, he goes on to challenge the opinion that

psi phenomena are impossible, pointing out the many occasions in history when established beliefs were contradicted by later discoveries. He also discusses bias by materialists, and by Christians who reject reincarnation. Ng thinks that doubt has value and naturally encourages following the evidence. He quotes Carl Sagan's belief that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence", in order, rightly in my view, to point out that this only applies if you have a paradigm that is committed to the opposite view.

Ng lists what he regards to be relevant facts to consider, which includes the long history of paranormal belief. A significant proportion of the current worldwide population are believers, have had experiences, and some purport to have seen ghosts. These facts may, of course, partly be red herrings insofar as the tendency to harbour such beliefs may be the outcome of the way the evolved brain works to enhance survival prospects, beliefs being theories rather than facts, useful as a motivating force. The need to understand what actually causes what may create speculation if observations cannot confirm the actual reality.

Having satisfied himself as to the facts of survival, Ng then presents a novel theory of the emergence of souls, arising out of his belief that the life of the universe, estimated to be 14 billion years old, is too short for evolution by accident and random selection to result in the correct folding of polypeptide chains sufficient to produce consciousness. It leads him to propose that God must exist to create a sub-universe that could allow the evolution of consciousness at speed, resulting also in the ability of mind, and possibly also the evolved soul, to be detachable from the material brain. This he calls 'Evolved-God Creationism', which he states is a fundamentally materialistic form of creationism.

Ng attempts to define the soul. He begins by stating that if a mind—"subjective consciousness that perceives, feels and thinks"—did not exist, then we could not know the existence of anything. Souls are minds independent of bodies, both souls and minds being weightless. A hardened materialist would expand his definition of mind as being the effective consequences of the neuronal hardware which generates thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and behavioural programmes, each with its own function but each interacting with the other, consciously and unconsciously, in a state of dynamic homeostasis, in order to be able to adapt and survive in a varying, complex world. Consciousness may be defined as the involvement of awareness of the self, which includes mind and body, in relationship to the environment.

A Han dynasty philosopher once suggested that the mind is like the sharpness of a knife—without the knife there is no sharpness. Ng acknowledges this but prefers an alternative analogy of music and a musical instrument. He quotes David Chalmers as saying that typically one begins as a materialist, then transitions to becoming a dualist, then panpsychist, and finally an idealist, who believes that everything is composed of consciousness. Many scientists have reached that conclusion, including Erwin Schrödinger and Henry Stapp. Ng admits that he is probably still at the stage of dualism.

One view Ng discusses is that what underlies the reality of matter may not be consciousness, defined as mind separated from body, but something else. Mind requires an individual presence to be aware of what it is perceiving. Idealism seems to imply that all matter is composed of individual minds. Perhaps the notion of God arises from this dilemma. Of course, resorting to the notion of God the creator is kicking the can down the road.

Ng has a most pertinent section on mind–body interaction. He considers the mystery of the placebo effect, which he asserts categorically, together with hypnosis, healing, and phantom pregnancy, cannot be adequately explained from a materialist perspective. In my view, this is highly debatable. A thoughtful materialist would not dismiss these phenomena as rogue but regard these phenomena as aspects of the working of the unconscious, when the awareness of the self is not activated. Words and the imagination provoke feelings with bodily changes, all through information processing and transmission through neuronal networks. The fact that it happens outside conscious awareness makes it seem a mystery.

Ng actually does acknowledge the role of the brain in creating changes in aspects of consciousness, as is apparent when examining the result of injuries to different parts of the brain, but he believes that this can be explained non-materialistically by the theory of the brain acting as a receiver of external consciousness information. He cites Giulio Tononi (2004), who pointed out that the correlation between the firing of neurons and consciousness is erratic. Others may say that data is lacking.

Ng points out that Wilder Penfield's patients, as a result of the lack of agency experienced when neurons were stimulated into provoking an action, were led to believe that mind and brain were different. Penfield himself stated that there was no part of the brain that could make patients decide, and regarded brain and mind as different. Ng brushes aside Daniel Dennett's (1991) explanation and finds support in Eben Alexander's statement that the "neuroscience of consciousness" is an oxymoron. In addition, he quotes John Searle, who asserts that the five main features of consciousness—qualitativeness, subjectivity, unity, intentionality, and intentional causation—are unexplained. Computers will never be conscious. Ng finds 'Integrated Information Theory' unconvincing. Eventually, he concludes that Chalmers's 'hard problem' remains unsolved.

Ng discusses the implications of split-brain experiments, which on the face of it support the materialistic theory. However, he then cites experiments which show that cognitive access is not limited to one hemisphere, and the mind remains unified. I am not sure that this argument is conclusive, as it is quite apparent that consciousness is a subtle and variable entity.

His discussion of free will is equally contentious. Benjamin Libet's experiments seem to demonstrate the work of the unconscious in decision-making, and this has been interpreted materialistically as a negation of free will. However, the rise in unconscious activity may be purely random, without

intention, and in fact coincides with the conscious decision. It is, as Ng remarks, complicated. Materialistic determinism would seem to eliminate the causal role of consciousness.

Naturally, Ng also provides a survey of reputed paranormal phenomena. He first considers child prodigies, those with remarkable skills apparent at an early age. He goes on to cite the many scientists, artists, inventors, and writers who thought their best work came from the spirit world. The materialist might presume their talent is a function of unconscious training, as, for example, speech development. Attribution to the self is therefore not made automatically, and may be directed to whoever the conscious mind might prefer as explaining the seemingly effortlessly arrived at results.

Likewise, information of past lives derived from hypnosis, which Ng discusses, may also be explained by unconscious misattributed creative processes, including cryptomnesia. Countering this, Ng surveys the compelling reincarnation research, including the rigorous work of Ian Stevenson, and cases of xenoglossy—involving the apparent paranormal knowledge of languages not spoken for centuries. Investigations seem to indicate transmission, not only of personality and information, but also of scars and bodily features. The so-called ‘super-psi hypothesis’ cannot account for this satisfactorily.

Ng describes the cross-correspondences and similar recent after-death communications involving xenoglossy. He also covers the impressive phenomena produced by the physical medium Indridi Indridason. Even more remarkable is the conversation in Ancient Egyptian with a communicator purporting to be the wife of a pharaoh. The transmission of Rosemary Brown’s rather convincing compositions and the dead Géza Maróczy’s chess expertise are also cited. However, one wishes that Ng had given more details.

He goes on to cover the concept, history, and notable cases of near-death and out-of-body experiences. Ng gratifyingly notes the possible non-paranormal explanations. However, recent research on physiological correlates suggests that brain activity is less rather than more during these experiences of insight and clarity. This supports the filtering theory of brain function. Nevertheless, it must be said that it may indicate the complexity of brain organization in regulating and prioritizing sensations, thereby ascribing meaning and distinguishing reality from imagination, a form of filtering of course, and an important factor in motivating survival mechanisms. Acute stress may abolish these mechanisms or, alternatively, acceptance of impending death may release the attentional focusing mechanism, allowing memories of significance to flood awareness.

It amuses Ng to contemplate the possibility that dreams might be the true reality. He cites cases of the dead providing information through dreams. He also points out that shared near-death experiences (NDEs) and verified information via out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are hard to explain with a brain-centred paradigm. He helpfully lists 21 points of the NDE that are the

same across cultures and some that are not, for example that God speaks with a southern accent to Americans from the south. He mentions the cases where verified information is reported by people whose EEGs have flatlined, including a seemingly undeniable case which has in fact been challenged, but for some reason does not discuss this further, preferring just to give the reference. This may be understandable given the number of references that seem relevant and the style of the book, but it is a little frustrating for those wanting the whole picture in as much detail as possible immediately.

The book is wide-ranging and includes a section about UFO phenomena, which are hard to differentiate from what is commonly regarded as paranormal. This is followed by an all too brief review but cogent discussion on recent findings on hauntings, poltergeists, and the phenomena of reported possession, including following transplants. Ng also considers terminal lucidity and regards it as a result of the brain shutting down, allowing the mind to function free of constraints.

After-death communication by a variety of means are noted, including electronic voice phenomena (EVP), which of course are subject to perceptual misinterpretation. Surprisingly perhaps, Ng tends to write off many instances of precognition as contrived. However, this does not stop him from hinting at a possible explanatory model to explain all matters psi, the details of which he expands in the last chapter. Here he discusses the currently popular theory involving monism and quantum theory, but he states categorically that this does not in his view explain precognition, which therefore does not exist. Alack, I am wondering if he is not falling into the same trap as materialists who have not looked at evidence sufficiently carefully because they cannot conceive an explanatory paradigm, although he does recommend an article by Williams (2021) which does that apparently.

The book also covers a subject of understandable importance to Ng, namely the reluctant acceptance of psychical research in China, where politics have played a significant role. Nevertheless, some intriguing work has been done which sheds light on the subjective experiences of those accomplishing a psychic task. With induction training, according to Shao Laisheng “almost anyone has some psychic abilities, especially those with low educational attainment and the young.”

Generously, Ng shares personal experiences and describes the talents of various friends and relatives in a commendably frank and open way. He is sceptical but impressed by a cousin who is able to bend spoons 720 degrees (a photo is included), noting that she has no reason to cheat, which would be extremely difficult in any case. He also knew a lady who commonly saw ghosts. Unfortunately, he seems to have missed the opportunity to note the circumstances or what was unusual about her.

Ng goes on to provide a necessary and interesting discussion of the super-psi hypothesis as an alternative explanation to post-mortem survival. However,

following a methodical analysis of the evidence, he arrives at the survival hypothesis as being the most parsimonious and thus the most likely.

Ng does not shy away from the ultimate philosophical questions. For example, he challenges scientists to think about what existed before the Big Bang and asks the perennial question, 'If it was God then who made God?' He goes on to argue that simple materialism is not just simple but superstitious. Ng lists the possible origins of mind, including God sending "souls to be imprisoned in our earthly world." He cannot conceive of the emergent evolution of mind and postulates the existence of previous universes from which our 'sub-universe' was created. This, he believes, would give sufficient time for the mind to evolve. He discards the notion of matter being derived from spirit substance (idealism), as matter seems too simple to him, the principle being that complex material is derived from the simple, not the other way round.

Ng suggests that God may have evolved in a higher, possibly Newtonian, universe and therefore did not need to be created. This statement confirms my view that he has in fact kicked the can down the road. How did the higher universe arise? He states it was there forever. Such an assertion is the same as avoiding the question! However, one must admit it might after all be true. Ng is keen to reconcile science and religion, and that is his solution.

Summing up, the book is a reasonably critical and up-to-date survey of the paranormal literature, including much that is not strictly relevant to the survival hypothesis, plus an appraisal of the consequences of an understanding of survival. Ng includes personal experiences, interspersed by philosophical discussion which may on occasion be interpreted as perhaps tongue in cheek but is nevertheless a stimulating attempt to complete the large picture of the whys and wherefores of our existence. His discussions often include surveys of beliefs that are of sociological interest, but it must be said do not of course constitute evidence of their validity. In addition, I am sure Ng will agree that he has not yet entirely solved the problem of the mechanism of survival, though he has suggested a way forward. Perhaps evident from the content of this review, one could mention that the methodical style that the book promises at the beginning is not entirely maintained, but this is a quibble, and understandable as the result of the varied topics the paranormal involves at every level, which demands some repetition.

The book has two appendices, which are translations from Chinese reports. Appendix A is an account of previous lives elicited by hypnosis, and seems to confirm the role of suggestion, imagination, and wishful thinking. However, Appendix B, albeit not fully documented, is a convincing account of a six-year-old visiting the village of his past life. Internet links are very useful, as are the references, which include Chinese literature, hopefully available in translation.

Ng is modestly aware of limitations when trying to make sense of the whole field, and is refreshingly not beyond expressing doubt, wonder, surprise, and indeed amusement when relating purported facts and his conclusions about

this fascinating subject. Although one can take issue with the extent to which he has evaluated alternative points of view, this book, for me, has been both highly stimulating and a joy to read. I recommend it.

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