

BOOK REVIEWS

WHAT LIES BEYOND: CONSCIOUSNESS, SCIENCE, THE PARANORMAL, AND THE POST-MATERIAL FUTURE

By Matt Colborn. Essentia Books. 2025. 223 pp. £14.99.

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This book's biographical information indicates that Matt Colborn "is an author, lecturer, broadcaster, and artist" who "currently teaches consciousness studies on the Alef Trust Master's programme" (p. 221). Judging from its website, the Alef Trust is a non-profit organization that provides online graduate education programmes and 'open learning courses' in New Age areas such as transpersonal psychology. Colborn has an MSc in cognitive science from the University of Birmingham, and a DPhil in biology from the University of Sussex. Driven by a lifelong fascination with the paranormal, he joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1998.

What Lies Beyond offers a thoughtful critique of the metaphysical belief known as *materialism*, which holds that the fundamental components of reality are matter and energy. In good part, materialism is based on classical physics, which embraces determinism, the view that things influence one another in a set way, like clockwork, and that, in principle, future events can be predicted precisely. According to classical physics, the physical world is objectively real, and its workings aren't dependent on whether it's being observed.

For many within the mainstream scientific establishment, materialism is the default position, with consciousness being regarded as a by-product of electro-chemical processes in the nervous system. According to this notion, which has been called *epiphenomenalism*, consciousness has no independent existence, and no causal properties of its own; and our feeling of having free will is illusory.

There's evidence supporting epiphenomenalism. For example, along with colleagues, the neuroscientist John-Dylan Haynes has conducted experiments in which people undergoing brain scanning have been asked to press a button with either their left or right hand. By observing subjects' brain activity, the researchers have often been able to predict, accurately, *several seconds in*

1. Haynes (2014) gave an interesting talk.

advance, which hand they will choose to use (Soon et al., 2008).¹ But, some of our social institutions, such as the criminal justice system, take it for granted that free will exists. For example, if I were caught robbing a bank, a court would be unlikely to accept a plea that I wasn't to blame, because my actions were wholly determined by impersonal physical processes in my brain!

There are numerous other strands of evidence that seem to support the view that mental activity is a reflection of what's happening in the brain. For example, the memory deterioration seen in Alzheimer's disease is associated with physical changes in the brain, and brain injury can affect mental functioning, as can the ingestion of drugs. Arguing the other way, Colborn refers to a researcher, John Lorber, who investigated a person with hydrocephalus. This was a maths student with an IQ of 140; yet, judging from X-rays, he had very little brain. Colborn adds that this case "was by no means isolated" (p. 35).

Colborn notes that the findings from psychical research also pose a challenge to the materialist view of the world, since they demonstrate the existence of mental faculties that seem to transcend normal physical constraints. In Chapter 5, he cites experimental evidence for such manifestations.

In Chapter 6, Colborn casts an eye on scepticism about the paranormal. He identifies two strategies that sceptics have used to cast doubt on findings from psychical research. The first one, which might be labelled 'informed critique', offers criticisms of experiments and tries to find normal explanations for seemingly paranormal events. Such criticism can be helpful. The second strategy is more destructive—it consists of mockery and dismissing parapsychology as inherently flawed pseudoscience. People adopting this approach may refuse to examine the evidence for psi, because their presuppositions tell them that such phenomena can't possibly occur. It's hardly a scientific stance.

Unless we're to suppose that people's brains can somehow be reconstituted after they've died, materialism seems to rule out life after death. However, many psychical researchers have argued in favour of survival. Take, for example, David Fontana, who died in 2010. He believed that there was good evidence (e.g., from studies of mediumship) for the notion that consciousness survives bodily death. He noted that spirit communicators have claimed that in conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, the person's consciousness has very largely detached itself from the body (Fontana, 2005). From that perspective, a person with an impaired brain would be like a healthy driver with a damaged car.

In Chapter 7, Colborn contends that mystical experiences and those evoked by psychedelic drugs suggest that there's more to consciousness than brain activity. Arguably, though, mystical and psychedelic experiences could be wholly attributed to altered brain activity, unless they're accompanied by clear-cut psi functioning (e.g., clairvoyance or precognition).

The word 'materialism' is sometimes used to refer to an excessive preoccupation with accumulating wealth and riches. This is, of course, different from the metaphysical materialism discussed above. However, to some extent, the two

types of materialism may go hand in hand. Colborn recognizes this (see Chapters 9 and 10) and, rightly in my view, advocates a more spiritual approach to life.

Excellent though it is in many respects, there are a few minor problems with the book. For example, Colborn mentions someone giving a “TED talk” (p. 9), but he doesn’t say what TED refers to. He refers to “the *Daily Mail*’s psychiatrist Dr Michael Mosley” (p. 64). However, my understanding is that despite graduating in medicine, the late Michael Mosley never worked as a doctor. Colborn equates a probability of 0.05 with “1 in 25” (pp. 74–75), which should be 1 in 20.

The book contains endnotes and an extensive bibliography. But, disappointingly, there’s no index, which a book like this really needs. To me, it’s like giving someone gin and tonic without ice and lemon!

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