

What Shall We Make of the Human Brain?

President George Bush's decree that the 1990s be the Decade of the Brain is fulfilling itself right before our eyes. The neurosciences are making themselves known in the wider circles beyond the sciences. Even our popular culture has embraced the new knowledge about the brain. There is little consensus, however, on what the sciences of the brain actually mean for our lives, except at the most utilitarian level—such as brain manipulation and brain repair.

Lack of consensus means disagreement, and the five articles that follow in this symposium reveal that disagreement, even among serious thinkers who are deeply concerned about how the sciences impact our lives. If we view these five articles as books on a shelf, we find the two ends marked by sharply divergent interpretations of the neurosciences and their significance for our lives. At one end stands the excerpt from the recent book, *The Humanizing Brain*, by James Ashbrook† and Carol Rausch Albright. Sharing the conclusions of many years of reflecting on the neurosciences, the authors present an eloquent hypothesis that is predicated on the firm conviction that the structure and processes of the brain reflect the nature and work of God. At the other end, with equal expertise and passion, Jeffrey Kurland insists that evolutionary perspectives on the brain are incommensurable with Western religious interpretations.

The Ashbrook-Albright proposal is exemplified in their drawing upon “neurophysiologist Paul D. MacLean’s classic view of a triune brain, with three anatomical and functional sectors as clearly suggestive of various ways of understanding God’s ways of being God” (p. 20). Kurland’s conclusions are summarized in his succinct statement: “Darwin has eliminated the need for a God who created us. A Creator is logically unnecessary because the Darwinian mechanism leaves nothing for such a God to do” (p. 86). Since our brains have evolved in ways that are described by Darwin’s theories, neurobiology itself cannot coexist with an idea of God.

If these are the bookends on our shelf, we find James Nelson near one end, thoroughly championing the Ashbrook-Albright interpretation, while William Rottschaefer stands close to Kurland in his insistence that only a Christian-Augustinian starting point could bring God so clearly into the discussion of the brain and its evolution. Mary Lynn Dell, while clearly

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aware of the cogency of Kurland's way of thinking, nevertheless speaks appreciatively of the theological interpretations of the neurosciences.

It must be said clearly that these five authors did not write their pieces with the awareness that the editor would arrange them in the fashion that the reader finds here. None of the authors knew that they would be subjected to the editorial license that accounts for their placement on the horns of a polemic. However, as the editor saw the articles coming in, he recognized that in a microcosm, one of the great debates of our times is being acted out: How shall we understand and interpret the new knowledge we are receiving about that most intimate of organs, the human brain? Let the readers compare the discussions and decide for themselves—that is what all of us will have to do in the years ahead. This issue will become even more urgent for us as the Decade of the Brain segues into what may become the Century of the Brain.

—Philip Hefner