

Book Reviews

positions on human nature are not based on the data provided by neuroscience. This is particularly interesting in his critique of Patricia Churchland, who has done considerable work in relating neuroscientific research to several problems of human nature in philosophy. His dismissal of her work seems to indicate a deficiency in his understanding of relating the complexities of human nature to the neural mechanisms of the human brain, especially since Churchland and Pfaff seem to be involved in similar projects. Pfaff is also interested in replacing religious and theological positions that focus on human selfishness and wants to demonstrate that persons are “wired for goodwill” (p. 5).

In Pfaff’s view, if a neural explanation of altruism can be described, it is no longer necessary to assume a role for religion in moral formation. If persons knew that they were “wired” for goodness, they could use this knowledge as a basis for changing their behaviors. “A kid could simply say ‘I’m good and I know it,’ that is, my brain naturally and instinctively produces my good behavior; any other type of behavior would seem unnatural and self-defeating” (p. 163). Statements such as this one indicate a naïve optimism that is present throughout his work without any real engagement with the obvious counterarguments that make his theory highly unconvincing. Pfaff’s work demonstrates a cursory reading of the philosophical and psychological sources on human nature that would dispute his claim. His assumption of an easy inferential leap from neural mechanisms to humans “wired for goodwill” masks a multitude of historical, philosophical, and psychological problems with his theory.

Although Pfaff’s theory is based on neuroscience, he draws from several areas to support his theory, including sociology, political science, and economics. In his final chapter, he proposes two primary strategies for allowing the altruistic brain circuits to function as they were designed: “... we treat concerns over moral behavior as we would a problem of public health” and “the empowerment of women, lessening the effect of testosterone-driven behavior in society” (p. 251). Both of these suggestions seem plausible at the practical level, but it remains unclear whether ABT theory requires these kinds of solutions; persons who do not adhere to ABT could still endorse them. Is the solution really decreasing “testosterone-driven behavior” or is it decreasing dominant social structures and violence? There is no real evidence to demonstrate that focusing on neural structures involved in altruism will provide a better foundation for morality—as opposed to religion or philosophy.

Philosophers and theologians have often offered more positive perspectives on the altruistic aspects of human nature in comparison to a “selfish gene” perspective.

However, whether someone is thought to be good because they have a soul or an altruistic brain, the difficulties that often accompany and cause negative social behavior cannot be overcome so simply, because morality is more than neural function. It is a consequence of multiple layers of causative effects at several levels within the hierarchy of science, including economic, cultural, familial, and psychological. Pfaff offers many interesting descriptions of current research in cognitive neuroscience, which will be of interest to persons not familiar with the field, and his emphasis on the positive aspects of human nature is a welcome change from evolutionary accounts that emphasize human self-interest. However, his theory of how altruism works based on several brain mechanisms requires additional empirical support to be accepted as an accurate description of the more empathetic, benevolent, and compassionate aspects of human nature.

Additionally, Pfaff makes the mistake of assuming that science is self-interpreting. He assumes that properly interpreted neuroscientific research leads directly to conclusions about its moral, philosophical, and theological relevance. Pfaff’s theory contains many philosophical assumptions that are not “in the data” themselves, but part of a larger philosophical and at least partially antitheological worldview that goes largely unacknowledged. From a Christian perspective, I think this is the larger problem with the work. Although the science is at times very interesting, the philosophical and theological assumptions are not sufficiently discussed to allow the Christian theist to interact with the material in a critical way. For Christians interested in learning some of the perspectives in evolutionary science and neuroscience on altruism, this may be a helpful read, but for those wanting a more nuanced approach to how this area of science impacts morality and theology, a different source would be required.

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EDUCATION

MAPPING YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER: Charting the Course of a Professor’s Life by Gary M. Burge. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 138 pages, bibliography, index. Paperback; \$14.60. ISBN: 9780830824731.

Gary Burge has provided a valuable resource to those of us whose vocation is that of university or college professor. Drawing on decades working as a college professor, Burge has written a wise and easy-reading book full of sage advice for university faculty. Although professors are well prepared in their chosen disciplines, without a wise mentor, they are often unaware of the patterns that accompany the typical academic career.

Burge identifies the three primary “stages” of development in a scholar’s career as follows (p. 23): Cohort 1 is made up of people who have finished their terminal degree and are working toward tenure (typically ages 28–38). Cohort 2 represents midcareer faculty who have been tenured or promoted and have acquired job security (typically ages 34–55). Cohort 3 represents senior faculty near the end of their careers (typically ages 50–70).

Burge identifies some of the most common opportunities and risks that are present within each cohort. The book is replete with stories of professors that exemplify certain patterns found within each of the cohorts (albeit with the disclaimer that the personal details have been changed). The characteristics he describes ring true to me, as I could frequently picture faculty I have encountered along the way who reflect several of the postures and situations he describes.

Burge identifies the traits of cohort 1 as core identity formation, developing peer relationships as well as student and college validation. He identifies the classic risks to this cohort as failures in teaching or scholarship, failing to assimilate into institutional mission and culture, being influenced by cynical peers, anxiety and loss of confidence, and failing to cultivate friendships. Burge wisely emphasizes the importance of a good mentor for those in this cohort. He also acknowledges some of the unique issues that can arise for women in academics. He identifies the primary goal for professors in cohort 1 as finding “security,” whether that be in tenure or in a multi-year contract.

Cohort 2 professors are marked by growing maturity and confidence. Burge identifies the traits for this cohort under the categories of developing as a teacher, evolving scholarship, and “finding your voice.” The risks he identifies for this stage include the cessation of professional development, egocentric behavior, and institutional dissonance. He also mentions issues that can arise with “hero development,” when certain professors are elevated by the college as marquee faculty while other faculty begin to feel less valued and excluded from the “inner ring.” Ultimately, he identifies the main goal for cohort 2 to be a sense of well-being, success, and ongoing validation.

Burge suggests that the main question characterizing cohort 3 is “will I find significance?” Some of the traits he discusses in this cohort include core identity issues, competency, and becoming a mentor or sage. He also talks about the importance of “embracing descent” as we end our careers and enter the last stage of life. Some of the pitfalls he identifies for this cohort include disengagement or disinterest, self-absorption, reclusive behavior, and technology anxiety. Burge also describes

the issue of the perpetual adolescent faculty member who never grows up—socializing with students as if they were one of them and dressing like a nineteen-year-old. He reminds us that students are seeking faculty to be friendly adults, not friends. He concludes that faculty in this cohort should endeavor to end well, content with our contributions and a sense that it has all been worth it. The chapter includes an addendum with some practical advice about retirement.

Burge’s references draw heavily from the field of psychology as well as reports, journals, and books on higher education. Burge is insightful in how he maps general principles in adult developmental stages onto the career trajectory of a professor. One thing that I found disappointing was the minimal time spent discussing a Christian perspective on the vocation of a professor. I suppose I was expecting more theological insights on vocation from Burge, a professor of New Testament at Wheaton College. While he does reference a few resources on the vocation of a Christian scholar, these could have been woven much more explicitly into the insightful discussions throughout the book.

As a midcareer professor who recently faced unexpected twists and turns in my career, I found the book quite helpful. Some of the opportunities and situations he described are ones that seemed to speak to me directly. I could imagine this book being one of the resources in a new faculty orientation program. In addition to new faculty, I suspect many faculty from other cohorts may find this a helpful resource as they reflect on their own academic careers.

Reviewed by Derek Schuurman, a cohort 2 professor who is currently a visiting Associate Professor of Computer Science at Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA 51250.



ETHICS

BEYOND THE ABORTION WARS: A Way Forward for a New Generation by Charles C. Camosy. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015. 207 pages. Hardcover; \$22.00. ISBN: 9780802871282.

In *Beyond the Abortion Wars*, Catholic ethicist Charles Camosy (Fordham University) looks unflinchingly at the apparent impasse in the US abortion debate between “pro-choicers” and “pro-lifers,” and as a solution proposes what he calls the Mother and Prenatal Child Protection Act. Camosy takes the concerns of opposing camps seriously, gleaning insights and skewering falsehoods wherever they occur, and he finds large swathes of common ground that respects both women and their unborn children. In spite of occasional shortcomings in Camosy’s arguments, I agree with reviewers who deem this short six-chapter book a “must read.”