

Empowerment for such healing will come from loving God and living in friendship with him. Spreading love in the community, including to one's enemies, will lead to wholeness in the community.

*A Theology of Health* is written as a textbook and is not written for a casual reader who might be interested in a book on health or preventive medicine. This book is not illustrated with captivating stories that would lighten the text while still making moral arguments. It is intended to be systematic; some might be bothered by repetition that is intrinsic to this format. Other books in this genre include Jean-Claude Larchet's *Theology of Illness* and Neil Messer's book *Flourishing*. VanderWeele acknowledges the contribution of these books to the writing of his own book. Larchet's 1991 book was written from an Orthodox perspective. Messer writes from a Reformed theology perspective, publishing his book in 2013. Compared to VanderWeele's work, these earlier books more directly address controversies in medical ethics.

I admire the author for his scientific work in epidemiology methods and his publication of other textbooks more germane to this book, most notably his co-editorship of *Handbook of Religion and Health* (third edition, 2024) along with Harold Koenig and John Petzet. Peer-reviewed studies on which he is a co-author are among the many public health studies cited.

I know many Christian physicians and medical professionals who would benefit from reading this book. Pastors and chaplains who minister to the spiritual needs of the sick would be better able to appreciate their work as an important part of healing. I plan to use this book in a study with the three young physicians I am mentoring.

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## PSYCHOLOGY/NEUROSCIENCE

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**THE IMMORTAL MIND: A Neurosurgeon's Case for the Existence of the Soul** by Michael Egnor and Denyse O'Leary. Worthy Books, 2025. 272 pages. Hardcover; \$29.00. ISBN: 9781546006350.

The existence or nonexistence of a nonmaterial soul or mind cannot be proved or disproved. All that can be done is to muster evidence that seems to imply one answer or the other. Egnor and O'Leary have written

what they believe to be a case for the existence of a non-material soul/mind. The question remains whether the evidence provided, and their interpretations of that evidence, prove compelling.

The authors begin with Egnor's religious experience and his commitment to prove that science can create space for the supernatural. While science writer O'Leary serves as co-author, Egnor appears to rely on his own expertise to then assert a difference between the brain and the mind, assigning the mind both an independent status that later moves to the assertion of the mind's independence of death. The authors use these assertions to advance a case for the immortality of the soul, a free will that acts independent of causation, and ultimately the mind as evidence of God's design. To address a more contemporary concern, Egnor and O'Leary conclude by asserting that this understanding of the mind also challenges the possibility of artificial intelligence.

They present a "soul of the gaps" argument that begins with the assumption that if you cannot demonstrate a localized place in the brain where a mental function is specifically processed, then that mental process must be accomplished by a nonmaterial soul (or mind). Even though Egnor is a professor of neurosurgery, the neuroscience and neuroanatomy discussed appear outdated and/or selectively presented in ways that mislead the reader. In essence, this book constitutes not a rational argument based on a weighing of evidence, but a polemic treatise.

A striking example occurs through the authors' descriptions and conclusions regarding the outcome of "split brain" surgery. These patients have had all or part of their cerebral commissures (the connective pathway between the right and left cerebral cortex) severed to control the spread of epileptic seizures. The authors propose that since these persons, despite a "split brain" (commissurotomy), continue to act and think as a unified person, the mind (conflated with soul) cannot be a product of the functioning of the brain. For example, they write, "Even when the brain is split in half, many important aspects of the mind remain unified. Thus, *the mind is something that the brain isn't*" (p. 19).

However, as I presume neurosurgeon Egnor must understand, the *brain* is not split in half. Although the surgery is colloquially labeled a "split brain," only the cerebral cortex is split. The majority of the brain is not split. The diencephalon, midbrain, and brainstem are all still unified with bilateral interactions. For example, the cerebellum in the brainstem has right-left commissures

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involved not only in sensorimotor and vestibular functioning, but also in aspects of cognition and emotion. Thus, one would not expect splitting of mind or personhood when cutting only the right-left connections in the cerebral cortex. What is more, the case presented by the authors as an illustration of what is preserved in a person with a “split brain” involves a *callosotomy*, not a commissurotomy—that is, the surgery leaves intact three smaller cortical right-left interactive pathways. This illustration is puzzling and grossly misleading.

A similar form of misrepresentation of neuroscience comes from a focus on old theories of cortical localization of cognitive functions. It is now clear that the highest forms of mental processing emerge from the interactive functional coupling of large cortical areas. For example, there is the *default mode network* associated with internal thought and self-reflection; the *salience network* is involved in detecting and processing important external and internal information; the *attentional network* subserves focused attention; and the *control network* is involved in cognitive control and decision-making. Each of these networks involves a different pattern of cortical interactivity from which emerges a particular form of higher cognitive functioning.

In contrast to this current view of cortical functional networks, Egnor and O’Leary describe cortical functioning in terms of concepts of localization—surprisingly, supporting their arguments with the work of Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield (1891–1976). While doing neurosurgery for the treatment of epilepsy, Penfield electrically stimulated various points on the surface of the cerebral cortex, observing the impact on sensory, motor, language, and memory functions. The research of Penfield had, at the time, a significant impact on the understanding of cortical functioning as based on very local brain circuits each of which is responsible for a particular facet of cognitive functioning. The authors argue from this neurosurgical work that the highest mental functions cannot be based on brain functioning because you cannot find a point on the brain that you can electrically stimulate to impact these higher forms of processing. However, this outcome of point-by-point electrical stimulation is exactly what you would expect if the highest forms of mental processing emerge from the functional interactivity of large cortical networks.

A strength of this book is the descriptions of different persons with major brain abnormalities who nevertheless function relatively well. These cases are indeed remarkable. Two of the conditions described are removal of an entire cortical hemisphere for the treatment of

intractable epilepsy (hemispherectomy) and the congenital absence of the corpus callosum (agenesis of the corpus callosum, or ACC). My students and I have studied both conditions extensively. It is indeed remarkable that many of these individuals function so normally. However, these brain abnormalities are not without consequences in their highest forms of mental functioning. For example, our recent research has demonstrated that persons with ACC, even when their IQ is within the normal range, have deficiencies in their capacity for creativity.

What the authors do not seem to be able to countenance, but what the majority of neuroscientists would conclude from these cases, is the extensive *redundancy* of brain systems, as well as neural *reorganization* known as plasticity. Brain systems exhibit a lot of redundancy of behavioral control both within smaller cortical neural circuits and between cortical and subcortical systems. If one area is damaged or abnormal, a lot of yet-still-sophisticated control is available for an adaptive work-around. Plasticity suggests the capacity for neural reorganization, such that preserved neural networks can assume some of the function of damaged or abnormally developed tissue. Neural plasticity is not a minor issue; it is the very basis of child cognitive development and adult learning and memory.

Unfortunately, the authors present a polarized view of the problem they address. For them, there is either a “materialist” or a dualist view. This polarity demonstrates several fundamental problems. First, using the term “materialism” semantically biases the discussion by using a term connoting mechanistic, rather than physiological, functioning. Physiology is alive and dynamic in critically important ways that mechanisms are not. In addition, the authors ignore the more subtle middle position of emergent physicalism, in which mind emerges from physiological functioning but is neither nonmaterial nor entirely reducible to its physiological functional parts (neurons or neural subsystems).

Finally, the authors presume that any physicalist view must be non-Christian. They ignore a large literature on Christian physicalism in which humans are understood as part of God’s physical creation. Given the incredible complexity of our neurophysiology, humans have emergent mental properties capable of abstract thought, significant degrees of free will, and comprehending (however incompletely) the presence of God in the world. This neurophysiological complexity, and its consequences in human thought and intelligence, is the miracle of human creation—a perspective *The Immortal*

*Mind* overlooks in the authors' effort to prove the existence of the soul.

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## SCIENCE AND FAITH

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**SCIENCE AND THE SACRED: Beyond the Gods in Our Image** by C. S. Pearce and Philip Clayton. Cascade Books, 2025. 192 pages including notes. Paperback; \$26.00. ISBN: 9781666769951. Hardcover; \$41.00. ISBN: 9781666769968. Ebook; \$9.99. ISBN: 9781666769975.

Protestants for whom neither atheism nor fundamentalism is an option face a declining menu of choices. On the American scene, there was a time when evangelicalism claimed a spot on that menu; however, its generation-long alignment with reactionary politics has rendered it unattractive for some Protestants. For the latter, the only thing left is some species of liberal theology.

*Science and the Sacred* is one such species. It is for people who want to believe in God but who can no longer believe that God rules providentially and intercedes miraculously. It is, in short, for many Christians who take the results of the sciences with the utmost seriousness. Accordingly, the first part of the writing presents the reader with quick overviews of current cosmology, evolutionary theory, and neuroscience, along with the consequences of these fields for theology. The upshot is twofold: (1) modern sciences make it impossible to hold such traditional beliefs as that God created the world by *fiat* and that humans occupy a special place in the universe; and (2) at the same time, these sciences "offer better opportunities for enlightenment, wisdom, insight, and integration than were possible in previous eras" (p. vii). Scientific knowledge thus takes away but also gives, and the net result is a gain, for this knowledge yields "spiritually promising possibilities" (p. 25).

Two insights from science are especially salient in the text: (1) all things are interconnected; and (2) a better future for humankind is possible, but achieving it depends on us. The first testifies to the vaguely Whiteheadian subtext of this book; the second results from its rejection of divine omnipotence, which is likewise part of the same subtext indebted to Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. The writing results in a sort of religious humanism: there is a God who is loving but is also not the sort of being who can directly effect change in the world. Therefore, it is up to us humans to implement God's vision for the world and

thus make it a better place. To that end, the sciences provide us with useful knowledge and help us jettison theological concepts (especially divine omnipotence) that no longer make sense from the authors' perspective.

As an exposition of one variety of contemporary liberal theology, *Science and the Sacred* possesses certain virtues: it is succinct and lucid. Within the limitations of its genre—it is not intended to be a technical discussion—it does a good job of making the case that religious folk should take the results of the sciences seriously, even if doing so means modifying or even rejecting some long-held beliefs.

This book does have some weaknesses. Given its short length, *Science and the Sacred* is not able to offer lengthy arguments for its theses. This self-limitation is not a fatal flaw; we need books that are aimed at audiences who lack patience with or background for lengthy arguments. However, 192 pages is not sufficient for the book's scope. For instance, chapter 9 ("Holy Books and Miracles") ventures into Christology. We learn, for example, that Jesus taught "a message of relational love" and that the main point of his ministry was to inspire "a tremendous love and desire to follow his teachings" (p. 107). Readers can judge for themselves whether these features truly capture what Jesus was mainly about. We learn as well that "Jesus did not create Christianity with himself as God; his followers did" (p. 109). This sort of statement assumes that we know more about the historical Jesus and about the origin of the New Testament than seems warranted. The authors have carefully cherry-picked their way through New Testament scholarship to support their view of Jesus and the New Testament—not that they are alone in this strategy.

One of the curious features of this book lies in one of its more subtle arguments, which comes down to the claim that the authors' views are becoming mainstream and will likely constitute a majority view within religious circles. The authors tell us that "a growing number of religious and spiritual thinkers" prefer evolutionary theory to traditional scriptures when it comes to understanding creation (p. 27) and that "a rapidly growing number of us" reject a literal view of Jesus's resurrection (p. 111). Empirical claims of this sort are exceedingly difficult to substantiate. Readers may suspect that they reflect not large-scale demographic trends but, instead, the experiences of people in the authors' circle of acquaintances.

Related to this feature is the claim that the notion of God advanced by the authors "works well within most of the [world's] faith traditions, except in the most fundamen-