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Mind the gap

Mark Cosgrove, The Brain, The Mind, and the Person within: The Enduring Mystery of the Soul

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MIND THE GAP

Mark Cosgrove, *The Brain, The Mind, and the Person within: The Enduring Mystery of the Soul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications 2018. \$18.99. pp. 180. ISBN: 978-0-8254-4526-2).

Our knowledge of the human brain – the most complicated structure of which we are aware – is the area of science which is advancing most rapidly in the early twenty-first century, as we come to a greater understanding of its structure, its operations, and the ways in which it generates phenomena such as identity and personhood. Inevitably, it can be difficult for non-specialists to keep up with these advances. Mark Cosgrove, a professor of psychology, offers useful assistance with his book, which interweaves information from modern studies of the brain with reflections drawing on biblical and other sources.

Cosgrove explains (p. 8) that he writes for a general readership, in order to explain recent research on the human brain and to enable his readers ‘to see the value of faith assumptions’ alongside this research. Ten short chapters explore such issues as brain anatomy, neurochemistry, the ‘hard problem’ of how physiological events in the brain give rise to subjective feelings, consciousness and free will, the relationship between brain events and religious experience, reproducing human brains in robots, and the possibility of extending the life expectancy of brains through cryogenics or through ‘uploading’ them into computer systems. He looks, too, at the various diseases and malformations which can hinder mental capacity, whilst insisting that these do not diminish the status of those in whom they are manifested: ‘Persons are still persons no matter what the state of their brains and their abilities to show their individual personhood’ (p. 120). Personhood is defined in an explicitly theological way: ‘Personhood is not what I can do or say, but who I am in God’s view of and love of us’ (p. 121).

As this summary suggests, Cosgrove’s approach tends to juxtapose what might broadly be thought of as scientific and Christian understandings of the human being, but he does so without establishing much in the way of connections between them. The sheer range of topics covered in this book may have militated against a detailed examination of how brain science might engage with theology, and *vice versa*.

Each chapter ends with one or more sections on ‘People of Interest’, historical figures whose work impinges on the topic of the chapter, and with one or two ‘books I think you might like’. The homely, conversational style is marred by frequent errors in grammar and spelling (for example, the name of Eugene d’Aquili is spelled in three different ways on pages 99, 106 and 179). Referencing is sporadic, rendering much of the book anecdotal rather than scholarly. But there is much here that will be helpful in enabling religious believers to engage fruitfully with ideas emerging from brain science. Cosgrove’s book might well be found useful by Church study groups, in which case it would serve its author’s intentions well.

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