

HUMAN NATURE

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*Reflections
on the Integration of
Psychology and Christianity*

Malcolm A. Jeeves

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*To Ruth,
For unfailing support*

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PREFACE TO THE 2006 EDITION

THE NATURE OF HUMAN-NESS is central to many disciplines: psychology, anthropology, sociology, theology, soteriology, and eschatology to name a few. The questions raised are daunting and the aim of this book remains to offer guidelines to help develop critically constructive, open-minded, biblically based thinking, which faces squarely the relevant current scientific evidence. In addressing any questions about the implications of science for our understanding of human-ness it is crucial to remember that the outcome of any study of human nature will necessarily be limited by the focus of the investigations and the techniques used. In this book the focus is on psychology, particularly at its interfaces with neuroscience and evolutionary biology. The investigators' techniques include natural observation, case histories, cognitive modeling (including artificial intelligence insights), and experimental investigation using single-cell recording and brain scanning of humans and animals.

Scarcely a day passes without the media telling us about the latest exciting developments in research at the interface of psychology and neuroscience. But these are not purely academic matters. The implications of some of them will ultimately, we trust, give hope to those for whom the consequences of brain damage come very close to home. As I write, the national press in Britain is giving detailed coverage of the untimely death of Mo Mowlam, one of its leading politicians. The *London Times* traces out the changes in Mo Mowlam's personality and behavior as she suffered from a brain tumor and the subsequent consequences of the necessary surgery to give her temporary relief.

The week following the *Times* report on Mo Mowlam, one of Britain's main TV channels presented a one-hour program on the once-renowned conductor Clive Wearing. Twenty years ago he was hit by a virus that led

to encephalitis that targeted a crucial part of the brain-processing memory. Since then he has lived in the eternal present. He has no memory of his wedding to his wife Deborah eighteen months before his illness. He knows nothing about what she does or of their past life. Despite all of this he remains charming, cheerful, and witty. The damage to his brain has changed his mental life and, to a degree, his personality forever.

Fifty years ago B. F. Skinner and his behaviorism were in their heyday and few self-respecting scientific psychologists in North America would have dared to talk about the mind or mental life. Today everything has changed. The 1990s, declared by the U.S. Senate as "The Decade of the Brain" has now been succeeded by "The Decade of the Mind."

Neuropsychology and neuroscience journals regularly cover exciting advances in our understanding of how our minds and our behavior depend upon the efficient working of the physical substrate of our brains. The progress of the cognitive revolution highlighted in the Preface to the 1997 edition continues unabated. The readiness of psychologists and neuroscientists to write about the mind and mental life is indicative of this welcome development.

Trends identified in 1995 when I wrote this book have accelerated and expanded in a way we could not then have imagined. But the basic issues, of how properly to relate the developing scientific portraits of human nature to traditional religious and humanist portraits, remain. These issues are so important that concerned non-Christians are publicizing them by assembling essays under titles such as *The New Brain Sciences: Perils and Prospects* by Dai Rees and Steven Rose.¹ They, and we, recognize that in many respects some emerging issues have become even more pressing as the actual, and potential, practical, moral, and ethical implications of advances in cognitive neuroscience become clearer.

The study of mind and the readiness to research it and to talk about it has not only come to the forefront of psychology's interface with neuroscience. Something analogous has occurred at psychology's interface with evolutionary biology. For some psychologists it has become *the* major topic in contemporary psychology. For them developments in evolutionary psychology, displayed in the new *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*,² have been so impressive and so rapid that they have seen them as grounds for mounting a takeover bid of the whole of psychology.

During this past decade a new awareness has also developed of a potential natural bridge between neuroscience and evolutionary psychology through the earlier discovery by Giacomo Rizzolatti of so-called "mirror neurons," which fire either when performing certain actions or when observing another doing so. One high-profile research neurologist in North America believes that Rizzolatti's discoveries in this field will be as far reaching for psychology as the deciphering of the structure of DNA

was for biology. Thus V. S. Ramachandran has written "I predict that mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology."

As you read this book you cannot remind yourself too often of the account given by Paul Vitz (see chapter 9) of the ways in which some psychologists, and no doubt also some neuroscientists, readily and perhaps unthinkingly shift their categories from the scientific to the philosophical and to the normative and then move without justification to theories of moral obligation. In so doing they blur the conceptual boundaries between science and the broader views of humankind already richly available in literature, philosophy, and religion that come to us from centuries past. That some psychologists and neuroscientists are either unaware of or unwilling to expose their own metaphysical and moral presuppositions will continue to be a problem and particularly so if they seek to invoke what they believe is the authority of science to authenticate their opinions.

For the thoughtful Christian, developments in neuropsychology and evolutionary psychology inevitably raise challenging questions about basic doctrinal and pastoral matters. How free are we to make responsible judgments? Are we embodied souls or mere DNA-reproducing machines controlled by invariant physico-chemical reactions? Are we apes on the way up? Angels on the way down? Sinners for whom Christ died or helpless pawns in a post-modern jungle? Pilgrims on a journey or flotsam in a flood?

One topic about our Christian understanding of ourselves that has received more attention than others has been the essential nature of the human person. The accelerating and accumulating scientific evidence of the intimate interdependence of mind and brain, what used to be called soul and body, has sent us back, with the help of biblical scholars, to re-examine what the ancient texts say about the soul. As a result, the past decade has witnessed a series of books focusing on ways in which developments in psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology prompt a reexamination of some of our traditional Christian ways of thinking about the human person. I have added a new reading list at the end of this preface listing some of the more readily available books and journal articles that represent the variety of responses from those who, whilst sharing the same basic Christian beliefs, interpret the impact that this new science has had on our understanding of human nature in different ways. Study the evidence, both biblical and scientific, and make up your own mind.

In closing this new preface, I wish to reiterate my special thanks to my very good friends and colleagues, professors Warren Brown and David Myers, and to Dr. Kenneth Boa who gave me permission to draw upon his Oxford doctoral thesis in writing chapter nine.

The following books and journal articles illustrate in detail how many of the issues raised in the 1997 edition of *Human Nature* have been amplified and widely discussed in the past ten years. Each in turn gives many further references to original source materials.

BOOKS

- Brown, Warren S., H. Newton Maloney, and Nancey Murphy. *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998.
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- Jeeves, Malcolm, ed. *From Cells to Souls and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
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- Myers, David G. *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Rees, Dai, and Stephen Rose, eds. *The New Brain Sciences: Perils and Prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

- Jeeves, Malcolm. "Changing portraits of human nature." *Science and Christian Belief* 14, no. 1 (2002): 3-32.
- Jeeves, Malcolm. "How free is free?" *Science and Christian Belief* 16, no. 2 (2004): 101-22.
- Jeeves, Malcolm. "Human nature without a soul?" *European Review* 12, no.1 (2003): 45-64.
- Jeeves, Malcolm. "Neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and the image of God." *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 57, no. 3 (2005): 170-86.
- Torrance, Alan. 2004. "Developments in neuroscience and human freedom: Some theological and philosophical questions." *Science and Christian Belief* 16, no. 2 (2004): 123-139.

PREFACE TO ORIGINAL EDITION

IT HAS BEEN TWENTY YEARS since I wrote *Psychology and Christianity: The View Both Ways*. It is instructive to reflect on the changes that have taken place in psychology over the past two decades. They vividly illustrate the intensity of the scientific research effort and the pace of discovery in psychology and related fields during that period. For thirteen of those twenty years I have served as an editor of one of the leading international scientific journals reporting research in behavioral and cognitive neuroscience, for three of them as its editor in chief. One spin-off from such editorial work is the privilege of, almost daily, receiving manuscripts reporting exciting research at the frontiers of cognitive neuroscience. The cumulative effect of such research is that it underlines repeatedly the ever-tightening links among brain, mind, and behavior and has resulted in new issues moving onto center stage within psychology. Consequently, fresh challenges have arisen as we ask what implications, if any, current psychological knowledge has for traditional Christian beliefs.

On both sides of the Atlantic psychologists have been intimately involved in national research initiatives. In the United States, we are halfway through the "Decade of the Brain," declared by the U.S. Senate in 1990. In Britain, an interdisciplinary research center on brain and behavior has been established, funded by the major research councils. Almost every day the media report exciting developments in, for example, our understanding of the neural basis of memory and vision, Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, depression, the possible neural bases of sexual orientation and aggression, and a myriad of other issues where research depends crucially on what is happening at the interface between psychology and neuroscience. Discussion of the possible implications of

such research for religious beliefs has also, at times, been given wide publicity. One such instance, occurring in the past year, is the appearance of the fascinating book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* by Nobel Laureate Francis Crick. The subtitle of the book, *The Scientific Search for the Soul*, says it all. Crick, and no doubt others, believe that developments in neuroscience and psychology *do* have implications for some traditional Christian beliefs.

One feature of the past two decades in psychology has been the continuing cognitive revolution. After gathering momentum in the early 1970s, it has become a major influence in psychology and neuroscience. "Mind talk" is respectable again after more than a half century when psychologists, primarily in the United States, were able to foist upon generations of students the belief that the only thing worth studying was behavior, and that any reference to mental life was, in some unspecified way, unscientific. During this same period the combined efforts of cognitive scientists and neuroscientists have developed into the discipline of cognitive neuroscience. Such collaboration has produced an impressive increase in research in neuropsychology.

Another issue that has received wide publicity and in which research in psychology is coupled with that in another discipline, in this instance, genetics, is sexual orientation. The general public is most aware of it in the ongoing, and at times ill-tempered, debate about the roots and fruits of sexual orientation. Here, sadly, scientific integrity has been constantly under threat by claims and counterclaims of what this or that preliminary scientific finding means for wider issues of sexual orientation and practice. The evidence has, at times, been hijacked, used selectively, and distorted by the gay rights movement so that it becomes extremely difficult for the nonexpert to disentangle fact from fiction and science from ideology.

While still constituting a relatively small part of the sum total of academic psychology, personality theories and psychotherapy represent a significant part of applied psychology and clinical practice. It has been four decades since psychologists, such as Hans Eysenck in Britain and Paul Meehl in America, called into question some of the claims made for the effectiveness of psychotherapy. With the demand for the services of psychotherapists and counselors seemingly increasing exponentially over the past two decades, this issue has recurred from time to time but has been somewhat overwhelmed by the understandable desire of psychotherapists to satisfy the evident demand for their services. One of the outcomes has been that the commitment of psychotherapists to relieve suffering, wherever possible, has, sadly, outrun the time or the effort they seem to have been able to allocate to examining the scientific basis of the therapy in which they are engaged and assessing its effectiveness.

This issue has been given high prominence by the widely acclaimed book by Robyn Dawes, *House of Cards*, subtitled *Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myth*. In it he pin-points issues that perhaps have not received the attention they deserve among Christians. So concerned have we been to satisfy the needs of those suffering, by applying this or that form of psychotherapy, that we have, at times, forgotten the requirement and commitment of the Christian not to depart from the truth, but at all times to “tell the story as it really is.”

In addition to specific issues, such as sexual orientation and psychotherapy, there are more general pervasive issues recurring across the board as we detect consensus views emerging about human nature widely shared by scientists working on mind, brain, and behavior. Thus, taken together, much neuropsychological research has pointed almost uniformly to the ever-tightening link among mind, brain, and behavior. One result is that it has raised, generally and with a fresh urgency, issues such as the extent to which we actually do have freedom of choice in our thinking and behaving. In the domain of sexual orientation, this in turn raises important questions for Christians for whom moral choice and responsibility are not optional extras. More specifically, among Christians it raises questions of the status of terms we have become so familiar with in the past such as soul, spirit, body.

Most recently, and across a surprisingly wide spectrum of scientists, a new interest has developed in a topic hitherto, almost exclusively, a concern of philosophers, though occasionally of psychologists. I refer to consciousness. A century ago it held center stage in psychology but since then it has, seemingly, been banished to the wings. Because of its central prominence today I have devoted two chapters to it. Physicists and mathematicians have played a major role in the rediscovery of consciousness. They have also helped us reexamine issues such as determinism by indicating the possible relevance of chaos theory and others like it to enduring concerns about determinism, freedom, and responsibility.

Bearing in mind the variety of issues raised above, I have written with several, at times distinct, readerships in mind—first, for Christian psychology students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, who are faced in many of their courses with a mass of evidence indicating an increasing knowledge of the biological substrates of cognition and behavior. Such courses also emphasize the unity of the organism. Most depend heavily on research on animals, as well as humans, for the discoveries being reported. They naturally raise in the minds of some students questions about human nature as it is compared with animal nature, and about the components of human nature in terms of the soul and the spirit, and the interrelationship between them and the body. For instance, do animals have souls? Are animals living souls? Does our

spiritual awareness depend on the intactness of our brains or, in some mysterious way, does spirituality stand apart from our biological substrate? I have devoted one chapter to the relation among neural processes, psychological states, and spiritual awareness and in so doing I have attempted deliberately to deal with issues which, for some, can cause considerable distress and concern.

Mindful of the differing expertise and expectations of those who read this book, I should like to alert you to the way in which some chapters are more demanding, in terms of technical scientific background, than others. The consciousness chapters (10 and 11), for example, will be, I suspect, somewhat challenging. However, in an effort to convey the flavor of those chapters, and any others that you may be inclined to skip, I have included, at the end of every chapter, a *Taking Stock* section, giving you the main points in nontechnical language. By reading these sections you will, I hope, be able, at least, to get the basics of what I have been saying and what I think it may or may not imply for Christian beliefs.

At times I fear that, despite my best efforts, I shall have appeared more confident and dogmatic about some of the things I have written than I really am. My basic hope is that the material of this book will, at least, enable Christian students and others to reaffirm a clear commitment to enthusiastic involvement in the scientific enterprise as it is represented in research and practice in psychology and neuroscience. For the Christian, this world is, as a well-known hymn puts it, "my Father's world." It is, I believe, part of our commitment and responsibility, as Christian stewards and disciples, to be involved, as our talents permit, in studying and exploring our Father's world, of which we are ourselves a part. In so doing we shall, I believe, discover each day more of how "wonderfully and fearfully made" we are.

Without the warm invitation from Fuller Theological Seminary to deliver their 1995 Integration Lectures, it is unlikely that this book would have been written at this particular time. While the lecture material probably makes up less than a fifth of the present book, it was the need to prepare for those lectures that set me to work on a range of contemporary issues at the interface among psychology, neuroscience, and Christian beliefs. I am deeply indebted to the president and academic staff of Fuller, and in particular to Professor Warren Brown, for many stimulating discussions during my visit to Pasadena. I am also indebted to my good friend Professor David Myers, who read parts of the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions. In particular, through his encyclopedic knowledge as a very successful textbook writer, he drew my attention to references that are not in my special research area in psychology but of which I needed to be aware. I thank him warmly. I acknowledge my special indebtedness to Dr. Kenneth Boa. In chapter 9,

where I compare psychological and theological accounts of human needs, I make, with his permission, extensive reference to his Oxford doctoral thesis on this topic. Finally, I am especially grateful to Mrs. Diane Lawrie and Mrs. Lesley Ferrier for their patient and dedicated help at the word processor.