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Our Fragile Brains (Book Review)

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Our Fragile Brains, by D. Gareth Jones. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981, 278 pp.
Reviewed by Paul Moes, Assistant Professor of Psychology.

One of the great frontiers remaining for human exploration is the mystery of the brain. As D. Gareth Jones states in *Our Fragile Brains*, "We are fascinated with studies of the brain because we become the object of the study as well as its initiators" (p. 13).

For centuries mankind has pondered two fundamental questions: the essence of human nature and the location of man's control center. Ancient man had located man's control center in the heart or other visceral organs. We now know the brain to be the seat of our thought process and the organ responsible for consciousness and inquiry. However, this knowledge fails to give us as Christians a greater understanding of the essence of human nature. For many non-Christian scientists the essence of man does lie in the very substance and physical arrangement of the brain. These scientists busily explore and probe the brain without regard to any higher order or authority. Jones attacks this mechanistic approach to the study of the brain as philosophically limited, theologically indefensible, and dangerous in its implication for present-day society. By examining both current neuroscientific research, as well as philosophical and theological concepts, Jones points out the vast implications of current research and thinking on an array of "critical issues" including human freedom and dignity. Throughout the book, Jones emphasizes the integrality and wholeness of the human person and seeks to apply Christian thinking to meet the challenge of mechanistic and reductionistic viewpoints.

The book begins by tracing the historical roots leading up to current views of human nature and brain function. The outline follows the development of notions of human behavior by starting with the Greeks who separated body, mind, and soul. Galen (A.B. 130-200) embellished the Greek dichotomies with the notion of "vital spirits" and "animal spirits" which coursed through the vessels and nerves of the body and were the source of thought, feeling, and consciousness. Galen's notions held sway until late medieval and renaissance scientists became aware of the importance of the brain itself. From this point on the views of the brain began to lose any emphasis on the soul and became more and more mechanistic. This trend continues to shape the thinking of researchers today and colors their approach to brain science. As Jones says, "Our presuppositions play a vital role in our attitudes [toward the brain] even when the presuppositions are not acknowledged" (p. 45).

After giving a thorough yet readable description of neuro-anatomy and brain function (at several levels), Jones moves to other issues. Armed with his Christian presuppositions, an historical understanding, and knowledge of current work in neuroscience, Jones tackles several difficult issues including split-brain

research, damaged brains and the issues of human freedom, the potential for brain control, and finally an attempt to form a more integrated concept of brain, mind, and soul. For each critical issue Jones summarizes (for the non-professional reader) the current "state-of-the-art" knowledge and then skillfully integrates this knowledge into a broader philosophical and theological framework. In each chapter and for each issue the reader is challenged to reconsider old dogma (both secular and "Christian") and to reach for a deeper understanding of human dignity and responsibility.

Two issues which should be of special interest to many readers because of their popularity and controversy are the issues of hemisphere differences and brain control. In dealing with hemisphere specialization, Jones discusses the functions of each hemisphere, but then attempts to show that there is no need to accept the notion of a "double consciousness" simply because the hemispheres have some specialized functions. He argues that the brain as well as the person acts as a whole; any loss of brain function leaves a person physically and mentally limited since all mental functions are integrated. As he states:

Without a whole brain even the simplest task becomes quixotic and the subtleties of normal existence assume gigantic proportions. (p. 83)

In dealing with brain control, Jones indicates how current technology holds the potential (i.e. through electrical stimulation, drugs, or psychological mind control) for behavior control. The issue of control, he says, should challenge Christians to face up to the implications for our view of human nature, our sinfulness, and our social relationships. However, the point is made that a new understanding of brain function in relation to behavior need not be anathema. On the contrary, Christians can use such information to deal more compassionately with our fellow human beings. As Jones quotes from Donald Mackay:

Each advance in our knowledge of brain processes is to be welcomed in principle as enhancing our sensitivity to one another's vulnerabilities, as increasing our respect for one another's strengths, and as extending our capacities to do one another good. (p. 45)

The final chapter deals with the more esoteric issues of mind, consciousness, and personhood. Drawing heavily from the Christian apologist and neuroscientist, Donald Mackay, Jones pieces together a logical argument suggesting that man's activities, knowledge, and beliefs are indeterminate from a mechanistic standpoint. He concludes, however, that the nature of man

cannot be compartmentalized to the mechanical or the spiritual since Scripture clearly shows that the whole man (mind, body, and soul) falls into sin and experiences redemption.

I believe the main contribution of Jones' *Our Fragile Brains* is to tackle many difficult and potentially controversial issues not only from a Christian perspective but from a scientific background. Many Christian writers in discussing issues on the brain have had limited understanding of brain function or current research.

Whatever happened to Eden? by John R. Sheaffer and Raymond H. Brand, 1980, Tyndale. \$4.95.
Reviewed by Delmar Vander Zee, Professor of Biology.

Whatever happened to Eden? is a book about the state of the planet as seen by two Christian professionals, one an environmental consultant and the other a college professor, both interested in providing some insight into how to manage the planet.

The book is very readable, easy to understand; it is not highly technical. No doubt it is intended for and is appropriate for a wide, reading public. Its style holds the interest of the reader and has an end section of notes and bibliography for further reading.

The opening pages reveal the authors' Christian predisposition and desire to effect better stewardship. They rightly see the relationship between consumerism, material and energy shortages, and pollution, and therefore are compelled to write a later chapter on life-style. Here two eras are sharply contrasted. One is a statement of current concerns: "Who's going to win the game? Where do I park my car? How do I lose a few pounds?" The other derives from an ethic of earlier times: "Use it up, wear it out, make do or do without." The life-style theme is picked up again in the last chapter where the authors present a brief outline for a sustainable society/community, based on awareness of the following basic creational—environmental facts. First, the life support system of the planet is a single system with many interactions. Second, there is a limit to resources, and third, these resources must be managed by recycling and using non-centralized energy sources, for example, solar.

The authors recognize the deficiencies in other popular writings on the environmental scene. For example, they rightfully point out that Lynn White not only misinterprets the biblical concept of dominion but also lacks a sense of history when he blames environmental deterioration on Western Christianity. Furthermore, the authors expose the essential shallowness and basic selfishness of Garrit Hardin's "life-boat ethics."

Although not a treatise on the economics of proper environmental stewardship, the book presents some ideas worth noting. In advocating developing solar energy the authors point out that the economic accountability would appear to be much better for solar, and much poorer for current forms of energy if *all* the true costs were considered, such as subsidies currently en-

Because of his solid background in both neuroscience and Christian thought, Jones is able to tackle these issues head on and avoids the vague generalities that so often accompany a Christian approach to brain function. The book is, therefore, essential reading for any scientist, philosopher, or scholar who desires to have a more integrated approach to a difficult topic. It may not be the final word on the subject, but few will dispute that it is an excellent starting point.

joyed by fossil or nuclear sources and their material and social costs. (In other words, who pays the bill for acid rain?)

Some models of more stewardly ways of dealing with resources are presented in the chapter "New Horizons" in which the authors cite projects that have been carried out successfully.

The book does not explore deeply the philosophical and theological aspects and implications of a deteriorating life-support system, although the fourth chapter, "The Human Community," speaks to this best. The question posed in the title is never explicitly answered. The problem of sin and its consequent separation and brokenness is never mentioned. The status of humankind is regarded highly in the book, perhaps too highly as evident in this quote: "The authors of this book believe God created the earth for *mankind* to manage and *enjoy*, and that the essential principles for managing the global enterprise are given in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Ignorance and disregard of these principles have dangerously threatened *human* survival." (emphases mine, DVZ) This and other passages imply that if we don't care for the planet our health will ultimately suffer and *therefore* we ought. . . . These consequences may be true but are only part of the picture. The biblically expressed doxological purpose of the creation as presented in the Psalms seems to be missing, and there is little argument for preserving and caring for otherkind (a term denoting creatures other than humans) except in the context of serving humankind. The servant-hood aspect of man's place in creation is missing as a common theme in the book. (This is presented very well in Wilkinson's *Earthkeeping*, Eerdmans, 1981.)

In several places the authors argue for a return to efficiency whereas a better choice of words would be thrift, recycling, and doing with less. Efficiency, after all, has been one of the false gods of our materialistic culture.

Overall the book has many good things to say and is one of many books that demonstrate a growing desire on the part of Christians to address the problems plaguing the planet.