

is the perception of consciousness in all its forms has been well known since the ancients. However, many of the actual methods by which the brain accomplishes its task have been revealed only recently through rapidly advancing medical technology. The proliferation of dialogue between brain science and computer science has nurtured a powerful alliance during the last sixty years. The architecture of the brain is finally being defined, and it is beginning to provide us with some first clues to the language of the mind itself. In fact, it becomes ever more likely that philosophers or theologians of the twenty-first century may eventually be required to show fluency in neural sciences, just as modern medical doctors must know their biochemistry. Things have changed that much.

As a natural result, we may be drawing closer to new forms of synthesis, entirely new insights which might finally help harmonize scientific method and religious belief. The correct term for this would be “neurophenomenology,” literally “using the neurological sciences to determine the nature of reality,” and this is, in fact, what seems to be emerging. “Neurotheology” has fewer syllables, says basically the same thing and links it specifically to religious philosophies. Just as Thomas Aquinas developed his philosophical system, Thomism, utilizing Aristotelian logic to order and anchor Christian theology, so modern religious thinkers are starting to warm to the new horizons opened through the study of neuroscience to provide intellectually universal and generally agreeable concepts on which to compare and explore their conclusions.

The fundamental reason to use brain science as the basis for a comprehensive systematic phenomenology is the simple argument that since we only experience what we perceive, we should first examine the structure and function of our major organ of perception. In learning more about the way we perceive reality itself, we may discover clues leading to simple and believable explanations of otherwise traditionally unexplainable mysteries. There are limits to our understanding, but this may be more because of the way the brain arranges consciousness than from any lack of enlightenment, devotion, or grace.

expressed most simply by the phrase "nature abhors complexity". By cutting away any excess, despite the myriad possibilities and variations of various solutions, the most likely are those that accomplish a task with the least effort. Given a number of possible explanations for any phenomena, the simplest is invariably correct. The theories of Nicholas Copernicus, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and Stephen Hawking all explain a wider range of physical phenomena with a more compact system than had been previously available. Each of these new perspectives allowed new and unexpected observations to fit into a radically different, but inherently simple, structure.

It is the second aspect of a paradigm shift that may not be as immediately apparent to a purely philosophical investigation. It seems that theories that change the way we think are nearly all catalyzed by very specific advances in technology. Without the lenses of Hans Lippershey in 1608, Galileo would have had no reliable telescopes. Without the improvements of Newtonian physics, there could not have been a nineteenth century Michelson-Morley speed-of-light experiment to provide new questions that Einstein finally answered. Like relay runners passing the baton, first science creates first theory, which in turn creates even first science. It was only a matter of time before the tools of brain science could offer new perspectives that could make a paradigm shift in religious scholarship possible, if not inevitable. New understandings are emerging, as radically different from the traditional world view as the solar system of Copernicus was from that of Ptolemy.

The Neurotheological Paradigm

Our sense of reality is generally accepted as our ongoing reaction to what is happening in the world around us. We are taught that the manner of this reaction determines our evaluation of a person's mental state. The world is real, but we interpret it differently; the universe is relatively fixed in time and space, and the way we interact with it is the variable.

This is the way current philosophy works. From a neurotheological viewpoint, this is backwards. The only place to start is to begin by acknowledging that the reality we perceive at any time is actually taking place in the brain. It is a virtual reality, perceived by a consciousness with rules and limits determined by what is

available, neurologically speaking, to work with in any given brain at any given moment. Reality is not decreed, it is self-created, it is self-perceived, and it can be easily deceived as well in ways we can understand, predict, and ultimately influence during our lives.

If the world we perceive and believe in is a virtual reality, the product of a process with its own rules, then as that process undergoes predictable distortions from extreme stress, or in the stages of brain death, might we not then find ourselves in another universe entirely as real to us and just as believable as the one we now perceive? Is this what happens?

This is just one example of a new exploration which combines elements of religion, anthropology, developmental psychology, and developmental neurology. It opens the door on a new perspective, one which may change the way many people think about the way they think, know, feel, and even believe.