



The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul

Mario Beauregard , Denyse O'Leary

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Do religious experiences come from God, or are they merely the random firing of neurons in the brain? Drawing on his own research with Carmelite nuns, neuroscientist Mario Beauregard shows that genuine, life-changing spiritual events can be documented. He offers compelling evidence that religious experiences have a nonmaterial origin, making a convincing case for what many in scientific fields are loath to consider—that it is God who creates our spiritual experiences, not the brain.

Beauregard and O'Leary explore recent attempts to locate a "God gene" in some of us and claims that our brains are "hardwired" for religion—even the strange case of one neuroscientist who allegedly invented an electromagnetic "God helmet" that could produce a mystical experience in anyone who wore it. The authors argue that these attempts are misguided and narrow-minded, because they reduce spiritual experiences to material phenomena.

Many scientists ignore hard evidence that challenges their materialistic prejudice, clinging to the limited view that our experiences are explainable only by material causes, in the obstinate conviction that the physical world is the only reality. But scientific materialism is at a loss to explain irrefutable accounts of mind over matter, of intuition, willpower, and leaps of faith, of the "placebo effect" in medicine, of near-death experiences on the operating table, and of psychic premonitions of a loved one in crisis, to say nothing of the occasional sense of oneness with nature and mystical experiences in meditation or prayer. Traditional science explains away these and other occurrences as delusions or misunderstandings, but by exploring the latest neurological research on phenomena such as these, *The Spiritual Brain* gets to their real source.

The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul Details

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From Reader Review The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul for online ebook

Mary Zimnik says

Beauregard is tireless in trying to bring his findings into recognition in his field. I found the book both easy to manage yet very strong in defining this debate among neuroscientists. Especially compelling is the full chapter devoted to his study on the Carmelite nuns. For anyone interested in the discussion between the materialists scientists and what is becoming more and more a groundswell of those who are opening their study to consider reaching farther (as all change agents will do), then this is a great place to start. This book does more than make the case for a continuing need to study the brain and the mind and PSI effects, it shines a light on how science, in its sometimes narrow mindedness, can be its own worst enemy. It makes a case for how when a field of study is on the parapet of major breakthrough, there will be a revolt against the norm.

Michael says

In this book, the author, a practicing neuroscientist at a Canadian university, argues that human beings have non-material souls that interact with the physical body by acting upon our neural networks to influence behavior. It's an interesting view, and one you don't hear often from scientists.

I'm not sure of the author's religious beliefs, but he seems to hold to something like the perennial philosophy of Aldous Huxley, William James, and Evelyn Underhill. It's a view that there's a common, eternal philosophy that underlies all religions, and in particular the mystical streams within all religions (Wikipedia). So Christians could strongly endorse the author's critique of materialism and scientism, but they'll have some problems with the author's acceptance of the perennial philosophy and its ramifications.

Overall, I wish the book focused more on making a case for the existence of the soul. I was hoping for a detailed case with philosophical arguments and rebuttals of those who hold other views. There's some of that, but the book is also a hodgepodge of critiques of materialistic academics, discussion of mystical experiences and near death experiences, discussion of the author's own research, short bios of Catholic mystics, etc. I came away with the impression that the scientific data are consistent with his view, but I'm not convinced that his view is the only one on the table.

Juan Rivera says

One of the characteristics of materialism is to think that there is nothing beyond what can be seen and touched, that science can not understand other things than material and that this is all that exists.

And what happens for those who have had the experience of having a mystical state, an experience of being close to death, an astral journey or some other spiritual experience?

Many of these scientists say that they are altered states of mind, fully explicable. I do not believe it.

If you want to know more from the point of view of neuro science, I recommend this great book.

The book begins by denying many of the concepts of scientists who try to explain spiritual experiences as disorders of the mind, or as simply material things, such as: Is there a program within our mind that makes us believe in God? Is there a part of our mind that makes us believe in Him? Are the mind and the brain the same?

And then he speaks, using scientific studies, about things like: neuroscience from a non-material point of view, what are mystical experiences and why do they happen? Can mystical experiences change your life?

And finally our studies with people who have done many years of meditation and prayers, as is their different mind.

It is a very good book to begin to understand what there are other realities, beyond the material.

Matthew Green says

The part actually dealing with Beaugard's research is worthwhile. Unfortunately, you must wade through a significant amount of other material that's worth far less before you get there. To some extent written in an anti-new-atheist perspective - if they hate us and show how their research disproves God and call us fools, we'll show research that makes them the fools! I've heard that O'Leary, the coauthor not listed here, is the main problem. Given the medical papers of Beaugard's I've read, I believe it.

Jennifer says

This book was written by a Christian neuroscientist. To say that there were parts of it that were "over my head" is an understatement. I learned to skip the "A View From Neuroscience" boxes embedded in the copy. In essence, this book was written to repudiate the viewpoint of materialist scientists who do not believe in the soul and believe religion is an evolutionary coping mechanism. I found many parts of this book most interesting: his insights on the narrow view of materialist science; his discussions on near death experiences; the placebo effect on humans; the research into obsessive-compulsive disorder; and the study that he did on RSMs (religious, spiritual and mystical experiences) with Carmelite nuns.

Gabrielle Ruban says

For several years now, I've known that the discipline of neuroscience is one that I want to dedicate my life to exploring - whether it be through academia, the entertainment I partake in, or the conversations I choose to have. Although I'm interested in STEM and learning about the biological basis to behavior, cognition, abstract thought, consciousness, and many other facets of what makes us (animals) exist as we do, I know that my love for the social sciences & humanities prevents me from limiting my exploration of the field to just the concrete nature of the physical sciences.

With a keen interest in spirituality and philosophy in particular, the notion of a metaphysical (or maybe physical) soul has always intrigued me, as it is something very frequently referenced in not only religious contexts, but also the social and artistic as well. Thus, when I came across Dr. Mario Beaugard's

nonmaterialistic perspective on the brain, I knew that this was literature that was right up the alley of how I want to examine neuroscience. Focusing particularly are near-death experiences, the psi effect, mysticism, and general RSME (religious, spiritual, mystical experiences), Dr. Beauregard strives to combat the stigma and criticism that this "pseudoscience" has faced as a result of the persistent attempts of materialistic science perspectives at invalidating all nonmaterialistic viewpoints and findings.

Conceptually, I think Dr. Beauregard analyzes the discipline with good intentions, and does so with clear preparation regarding secondary sources. However, the problem with the book's execution is not only its excessive repetition of the same arguments, but also the weakness in the support from many of the refuting points and said provided secondary sources. Many of Dr. Beauregard's counterpoints are redundant and provide little background explanation - with that being said, I'm not even looking for "hard science" as that would defeat the whole aim of the book, however he has a tendency to make statements and not to follow up on them. Additionally, each of the nearly dozen chapters is scattered with quotations from various intellectuals, scientists, philosophers, and general professionals, however I find that they not only feel like page filler, but they often are either not really relevant to the specific angle Dr. Beauregard hopes to take in that passage, but some of them almost feel contradictory. Even various of the studies he includes to examine show results that don't support his hypotheses regarding the notion of a soul, the power of spirituality, and the existence of an intangible mind.

Being that Dr. Beauregard is hoping to convince readers of an unorthodox view of the physical science subdiscipline that is neuroscience, these weak points prove to be too prevalent and unfortunately, don't help his argument whatsoever.

Marius Marsh says

Although materialist thinking neurological researchers often condemn the idea of spirituality and soul as being unscientific and non-existent, they do so only by ignoring considerable amounts of evidence that are at least as scientific as the evidence they present to discount such concepts. We are not simply bags of chemicals that can walk, but we are spiritual beings with motivations and connections to plains of existence exploration of which is still outside the realms of science, but certainly not disproved by it.

AJW says

I got this book a couple of years ago but was put off reading it by a couple of reviews that trashed it, saying it was rubbish pseudo-science and poorly researched and with an axe to grind. So I ignored it and read other recommended neuroscience books. Recently I decided to read it anyway and learn from its mistakes. I was astonished to find a very well researched book that was rigorously scientific in its approach. I found it a thought-provoking and enlightening read. Wish I'd read it earlier. What a fool I was listening to those negative reviewers without assessing it for myself.

Don't confuse scientific with neutrality. This book isn't an impartial account. It is a fierce attack on materialists - people who believe that the only explanation allowed for this universe and consciousness is one that only uses matter (i.e. there is no such thing as the spiritual dimension or the soul). The book looks at recent research on the brain and gives several compelling arguments why a person's mind is not identical to the electrochemical activities of his/her brain. For example there are reliably documented cases of people seeing things happening around them during near death experience while attached to medical instruments showing no brain activity. Elsewhere I have read explanations that a person having a spiritual experience was

really having an epileptic fit in their temporal lobes. The neurological evidence laid out in this book convincingly destroys that theory.

The tone of the book is quite hot. I can understand why somebody who doesn't believe in a spiritual aspect to life would want to spit this book out. But a book cannot be dismissed as pseudo-scientific just because the author holds to a worldview different from yourself. The evidence needs to be looked at and counter-arguments listened to. Read it, weigh up the evidence presented and make an informed assessment for yourself. Don't make my earlier mistake and dismiss the book without reading it.

Heather says

I am actually working on a radio program discussing many of the concepts in this book. Its premise is that many aspects of neuroscience cannot be explained by materialistic phenomenon. In other words there is a mind that is in charge of the firing neurons in the brain. Examples include the placebo effect, overcoming obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, and the effects of spiritual experiences (or prayer).

This book is not coming from a distinctly Christian perspective (although one of the coauthors is a Christian), but its research and argument against materialism is one that I recommend for the scientist apologist. The studies are fascinating; I enjoyed reading them. And the case against materialism and for mind/body duality is quite compelling.

Jane Harris says

This is a highly controversial book. Reviews I've seen are either highly positive or deeply personal and negative. I would say read it for yourself and see what you think. It does contain a lot of technical information, so it's not a book for the beach.

I should note that Denyse O'Leary encouraged me to forge ahead with *Eugenics and the Firewall: Canada's Nasty Little Secret*, a book many of her audience (if they are part of the Canadian right of right of centre populist set) probably wish I'd never written. Denyse isn't a mouthpiece for anybody. Nor is Dr. Beauregard.

Robert Fischer says

This book blows hot and cold, but pulled itself up from a 3 star range to a 4 star range in the very last chapter. For the best reading experience, skip the introduction. The book is really defensive (especially in the introduction and first couple of chapters), so go in expecting that. Don't let that put you off too much, though.

This book does not do a very good job making a case for the existence of the soul per se. What it is very good at is challenging scientific materialism and complicating understandings of the universe which are purely materialistic. This is done through a consideration of the scientific evidence itself, both in terms of materialistic scientific evidence and the scientific evidence that complicates materialism. The God Gene, the

God Helmet, memetics, and especially evolutionary psychology are all demolished through the very application of scientific rigor. Evidence—although only limited evidence—is offered which is at least difficult for a materialist to account for, and which the authors outright assert proves the existence of a nonmaterial medium for the mind. There is also scientific evidence offered to challenge some of the broad misconceptions about religious individuals and religious experience (e.g. religion makes people more prone to violence).

Although the scientific parts of the book are really interesting, the philosophy based above that is sometimes weak, or at least insufficiently explained. For instance, evidence of a will does not necessarily imply evidence for a mind. And as someone who spent a lot of time in the Calvinist/Arminian fray, I wince in the way the author uses "free will", both in terms of identifying it and in terms of its necessary consequences.

The evidence offered for "psi" and "NDEs" both need a bit more room to breathe. The case for "psi", in particular, is not well made and generally lacks evidence. The case based on "NDEs" stakes a lot on a single instance, and it would have been nice to hear about some of the studies which have intentionally sought to demonstrate precisely the kinds of evidence the author is looking for.

The book seems like it is taking on a bit too much all at once. It does a nice (if overly defensive) job with the attacks on scientific materialism in the early chapters — those chapters alone make the book worth reading. The concluding chapters with the study for the Carmelite nuns and surrounding conversation on the scientific study fo religious-spiritual-mystical experience is also very good. It's the stuff in the very middle which is a little mushy, and either needed more room or to be removed altogether.

Tanya says

Very interesting and well written. Great insights and fascinating research. Read a bit more like a text book so wasn't the most fun book to read but definitely worth a read. Wish there were Cliff Notes.

Jeffrey Sylvester says

I found the structure of "The Spiritual Brain" frustrating. As others have commented, Beauregard and O'Leary make an overt and excessive case against orthodox materialism but the text is interspersed with quotations of what the authors attempt to refute, which I found somewhat disruptive in terms of being able to pull coherent themes from their case.

The central thesis is that a separation exists between our physical brain and consciousness and that phenomena associated with psi, the placebo effect, Near Death Experiences (NDEs), and other mystical experiences confirm this, however I am not sure a clear enough case was made in this regard. That is not to say that the case cannot be made but I just didn't feel it was made clearly within this work when compared with other scholars writing on similar topics.

Perhaps my favourite part was how the authors framed the concept of "promissory materialism", or rather, the frame of thought orthodox materialists use to deny the possibilities of different paradigms that may hold the key to new understandings. The notion that whatever cannot currently be explained "will be" so we just have to wait while marginalizing ideas in the process that are theoretically legit yet untestable such as the Anthropic principle. This wouldn't be a problem if materialists weren't hostile to alternative investigations, but given the monistic nature of the system, and the perceived notion that any evidence against it could send

its legitimacy tumbling, the paradigm is a breeding ground for our natural tendency to subscribe to “hallway” thinking. This promotes a structural perpetuation of blind-spots and the type of heretical reactions that have accompanied all new forms of thought from the Enlightenment onward.

Of the explanations provided that were legitimate, I enjoyed the one that countered the materialist proposition that we haven’t “free will” and that consciousness is contingent on our brain, a physical mechanism. These authors hold that consciousness does not appear to have a physical mechanism, and that it is a quantum system, whereby “...the action of holding an idea in place is truly a decision you make, in the same way that the physicists hold a particle in place by deciding to continue to observe it”. And since we know from quantum physics that non-mechanical causes exist, why wouldn’t one consider the extent to which this makes sense?

From an entertainment perspective, I found the sections on psi, the God helmet and the Carmelite experiences quite lame but the section on NDEs profound. The themes discussed match up succinctly with those explored by other reputable scholars and the general idea that consciousness and matter are only a partial reality. After having read numerous works by various scholars, I tend to subscribe to the transcendental view that a fundamental reality exists that we cannot perceive given our terrestrial vulgarities and that organized religion has been man’s attempt to explain our inherently numinous and universal human experience.

3 out of 5 stars for Beauregard and O’Leary!

Gregg Sapp says

Biblical literalists and champions of creationism have often been criticized for relying upon arguments supporting their beliefs based upon gaps in current scientific knowledge. The “God of the gaps” thrives in those niches where the fossil record is incomplete or in our sketchy understanding of how life originated on Earth, as well as other places where discovery lags behind theory. The problem, of course, is that science has a way of filling those gaps over time, leaving religious dogma with fewer habitable environments. One would suppose that the fewer and smaller the gaps, the more people would be persuaded by scientific explanations over divine ones. Faith, however, can endure with just the most minuscule evidence – or even none at all.

Consider, for example, the belief that human beings are endowed with immortal souls, independent from their bodies. On the surface, it may seem like this article of faith is beyond the purview of science, and thus safe for believers to endorse without fear of being proven wrong.

But not so fast. In “The Spiritual Brain,” Beauregard, a neuroscientist, reports on his research conducting brain scan experiments on Carmelite nuns during their prayers, when they reported having mystical experiences. Lo and behold, he discovered that their brains lit up like fireworks. What does this prove? First, he concluded that the nuns’ mystical experiences were real, not just some hokum concocted by ambitious soothsayers to impress their followers. That, it seems to me, is a legitimate supposition.

Some researchers would have stopped there. Undaunted, Beauregard further suggested that these altered states of consciousness occur when our spiritual selves connect with a transcendent reality. To support his claim to have found evidence proving the existence of non-material souls, the authors reach for the gaps. What about the Placebo Effect? Doesn’t that prove that the mind has a separate domain apart from the body, but which can nonetheless influence it? And what about near-death experiences? When people have no brain

activity, yet upon resuscitation report having had bright and beautiful mental experiences, then that must be their souls breaking free, right?

I'm no neuroscientist, but all of this feels to me like creeping onto a very thin limb. Who is to say that a mystical experience isn't just a non-specific neurological event? I have no problem believing that the Placebo Effect is caused by mental events (hopes) that have beneficial physiological effects – no mumbo jumbo is required to explain it. And I'm loath to trust the veracity of reports of people who managed to get away from the Grim Reaper. Sorry, but no matter how profound they recall the death experience in retrospect, I have a hard time regarding testimony made under such extreme conditions to be reliable.

Maybe there is indeed a non-physical, even a spiritual realm of existence. Who doesn't hope for that? But the fact that we all wish for it seems reason enough to be skeptical.

Pierre A Renaud says

"Non-materialist neuroscience is a rallying cry for dualism. Like creationism and intelligent design this "new" neuroscience is a reactionary movement against science. Rather than a hypothesis that leads to predictions and experiments, it is simply a catalog of things modern neuroscience supposedly cannot yet explain. Unsurprisingly, the movement is spear-headed by intelligent design lackeys from the Discovery Institute and related affiliates. The primary proponents of the movement are Michael Egnor, a neurosurgeon and recent contributor to the Discovery Institute blog, Denyse O'Leary, a Canadian "journalist" who runs her own blog dedicated to non-materialist neuroscience and likes to copy and paste these entries over on William Dembski's blog as well, and Mario Beauregard, the author with O'Leary of a recent book on the subject of non-materialist neuroscience: *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul.* " <http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Non-mate...>
