『南山神学』43号（2020年3月）pp. 211-214.

【書 評】

Review of:
N. MESSER: *Theological Neuroethics: Christian Ethics Meets the Science of the Human Brain*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London 2017, 215pp.

Jakub RAJČÁNI

Messer, a British protestant theologian, whose recent wide-ranged publications appear very promising, takes up the adventure of challenging Christian theology with the findings of recently popular neuroscience. In itself a branch of science that aims at being an essentially transdisciplinary field, neuroscience cannot be ignored in current research. Some of the problems often faced are that people who are not neuroscientists or genetic biologists have difficulties understanding the technical terminology, neuroscientists often tend to consider other fields of study vague and less scientific and, still worse, that neuroscience is not immune to skewing as overly deterministically reductionistic. Even if we put aside the fact that the human brain is still far from being completely mapped and analyzed, the big question is whether everything is simply inscribed in our brain and genetically determined, or whether the environment influences in its turn cognitive development, and to what extent. These bear on questions of decision-making as a co-creative force of human nature. Be this as it may, the last decade of the second millennium has been fittingly called "the decade of the brain," even though there is no one brain theory. Therefore, even Christian theology cannot help but engage with these new and challenging discoveries, and perhaps reformulate its canonic positions on topics such as freedom of choice (*liberum arbitrium*), etc.

The author succeeds ingeniously at handling these issues by covering much of the recent scientific literature on the human brain and research related to it and, at the same time, by constantly questioning a self-centered neuroscience. While he apparently admits that this kind of research is of great interest and importance, Messer's main claim is that neuroscience can indeed become enriched by and in fact should receive inputs from other areas, among which is

theology. He aptly invokes thinkers of his own tradition such as Augustine, Bonhoeffer or Barth and even includes some pronouncements of the recent Catholic Church's Magisterium to create a fruitful dialogue between natural sciences and sciences of the spirit, and to offer possible solutions to some of the paradoxes of neuroscience. Rather than being satisfied with self-sufficiency, any field of study would do well not to neglect interdisciplinary areas and to dialogue with them. The book itself consists of 5 chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion, all of them rich in footnotes and references. Messer's journey begins at analyzing the genetic origins of human faith and *religion*, moving through neurological bases for *morality*, the crucial topic of *freedom*, the *consciousness,* arriving at questioning the legitimacy of interventions on the brain. Every chapter has a similar structure: after having explained and proposed the respective neuroscientific question, the author turns to theological perspectives on the matter. Let us briefly have a look at some of his views and affirmations.

Messer's underlying conviction is that "the mutual neglect of neuroethics and Christian ethics is detrimental to both" and aims at proving that "neuroethicists do not have good reason to dismiss Christian theology as either discredited or irrational" (p. 7). Studies of the brain as the organ that plays an essential (although not exclusive) part in most of the processes in human beings are important and necessary for understanding and explaining human behavior, but such studies by no means offer good reasons to dismiss theological claims or reasoning (cf. p. 16). It is indeed on the basis of the Christian doctrine of creation that natural science is motivated to proceed with research. Therefore, science can or should be fundamentally a-religious, but never anti-religious. While it is probable that religiosity as well as morality do have some evolutionary (and maybe genetic) background, this however does not explain sufficiently every aspect of the origin of morality or religion and, more importantly, it is not tantamount to saying that the process of evolution of them is purely self-driven or accidental. Emblematically, in Messer's view "putative insights from neuroscience are at best partial, fallible and provisional, and they may be distorted" (p. 63) and therefore they should always be adopted critically. Another major topic deals with free will, oftentimes tendentially considered an illusion in neuroscience. The argument is that there are intuitive and automatic mental processes (cf. p. 82), which is true, and that one efficient causal explanation of an event in the brain is sufficient (p. 91). In other words, the freedom of the will has to be either absolute, not determined by anything, or it cannot exist. To that proposition the author aptly reacts by saying that human freedom is to some extent pre-determined; it is fallen and therefore it is not

godlike. Quoting Augustine, Messer admits that "our greatest freedom consists in the ability to bind our wills to the good" (p. 95). Humans can find themselves in a really sinful condition even though it is not completely in their power not to sin (p. 97). To sum up using Barth's expression, "creaturely freedom is not the godlike freedom of the uncaused causer, but is both limited and underwritten by God's governance of the world, and both freedom and causal necessity are 'the gift and dispensation of God'" (p. 103).

Moving on to consciousness disorders as the so-called "persistent vegetative state" – a bioethical issue that for example concerns the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment – Messer claims that "researchers' understanding of basic but non-self-evident concepts may shape every stage of their studies from experimental design to conclusions" and as such "this area of neuroscience, like others, is profoundly theory-laden from start to finish" (p. 111). Having said that, he adds, "it would be dangerously premature, for example, to conclude that DoC [disorder of consciousness] patients *cannot* be truly conscious just because their brain activity does not conform to predictions generated by one or other of the theories" (p. 115, emphasis in original). It is also a fact that "neuroscientists who theorize about consciousness sometimes imagine that their work discredits 'religious' views of the soul" (p. 117), which is non-sense, given that "'body' and 'soul' denote the whole human person, seen from different perspectives" (p. 119-20). Scientific evidence might give indicative reasons for discerning a presence of human soul in the body, but in the end it is true that "a soul's presence or absence cannot be proven empirically" (p. 130).

If we investigate Messer's claims regarding Christian theology based on the thought of S. Hauerwas, we can see that one of the characteristics of his argumentation is that, diverging from Catholic ethics, personhood as bearer of human rights is not a necessary criterion for deciding about whom to help and whom not to help. Commenting on the famous Samaritan story, the author upholds that "consciousness no longer has to serve as a boundary marker defining the limits of personhood and the right to life" (p. 133). Different in premise but not so much in conclusions from the Catholic bioethical view, he vigorously defends the opinion that "the distinctive value of any human life does not consist in self-awareness, continuity of consciousness, or the capacity to have plans, preferences, relationships or even interests" (p. 134), and he insists that "we are called to be neighbors to truly PVS [persistent/permanent vegetative state] patients, as to any human creature, by showing love and mercy" to them (p. 137). In principle the author agrees also with respecting the actual will of the patients for themselves, even to forego basic artificial nutrition and

hydration (ANH), while maintaining that sometimes the patients' perception of their disability and the relative satisfaction of such a life differs drastically (in a more positive direction) from how the environment tends to see it, projecting its own expectations on the patient.

Finally, Messer cannot escape the question about technical enhancements of the brain. The fact is that our knowledge about the functioning of the brain becomes at the same time power that enables us to modify it (cf. p. 143). Messer admits to stick to the logical distinction between "therapy" and "enhancement" in their evaluation (being the latter more problematic than the former), while the crucial issue is how to interpret the given and imperfect human nature. Referring to scholars like M. Sandel and W. May, the author endorses the idea that "likewise in scientific engagement with nature we need a balance between 'beholding' the world and 'molding' it" (p. 152). Health and a sane bodily existence are to be considered human goods and values to be protected, but at the same time we have to be aware that they are "penultimate goods" concerned with the fulfillment of some of our this-worldly goals (cf. p. 161). Both attitudes are needed – regarding this world as good, something for which humans have to give thanks; and as radically flawed and in need of healing. In Messer's words, "appropriate gratitude for the gift of our finite, embodied creaturely existence does not mean simply accepting every aspect of the way we are" (p. 169). However, nowadays often overused or abused forms of pharmacological cognitive enhancement seem to suggest an impatience with actual limitations in existence. Thus, they result in ethically suspicious outcomes, because "they can all too easily be motivated by a basic dissatisfaction with the opportunities and limits of human creaturely existence" and sometimes express even "an explicit ambition to become godlike beings [which makes it hard not to see them] as counterfeits of the salvation and future hope" (p. 175).

This brief survey should suffice to show that Messer's recent book offers a founded scholarly analysis of many recent neuroscientific arguments and with their assessment from a theological point of view. Overall, his views are balanced with references to other important authors and easily understandable without sounding overly scientific. This book offers yet another proof that neuroscience and humanities can (or have no choice but to) mutually enlighten each other, may it be by setting limits in research for one another or by providing fruitful motivation and stimuli for their own further reflection.