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MATERIALISM, WE PRESUME

A Summary Critique of Mario Beauregard's and Denyse O'Leary's *The Spiritual Brain*

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Many people implicitly trust science because they believe its methods are neutral and objective. *The Spiritual Brain* argues, however, that science has been hijacked by a dogmatic *presumption of materialism*: materialism is not the inevitable conclusion of scientific evidence, but an assumption made before investigation even begins. The book focuses on the impact of materialistic bias on neuroscience. Authors Mario Beauregard (a neuroscientist at the University of Montreal) and Denyse O'Leary (a Toronto-based journalist of science and religion issues) contend that materialism leads scientists to offer highly implausible explanations of the powers of the mind and especially of what they call "religious, spiritual, and/or mystical experiences" (RSMEs). The book also explores what neuroscience looks like *without* a presumption of materialism.

In the opening chapter, Beauregard and O'Leary describe the widening chasm between our normal self-understanding and the views of most contemporary neuroscientists, whose materialism makes them cheerfully dismiss or trivialize the self, free will, and altruism, despite the evidence for their reality. The failures of science in these and other areas are excused by what Karl Popper called "promissory materialism" (p. 24), which assumes that science will eventually provide satisfactory materialistic explanations for everything. Since this attitude can be maintained indefinitely, regardless of the evidence, it is a convenient way of blocking serious consideration of nonmaterialist proposals.

A God Delusion? Promissory materialism encourages scientists to presume at the outset that RSMEs are illusions and not deep insights into reality. In Chapters 2 through 4, Beauregard and O'Leary explore the many naturalistic attempts to explain away RSMEs. Matthew Alper proposed a "God" part of the brain and Jeff Saver and John Rabin continue a long tradition of claiming that RSMEs are abnormalities associated with Temporal Lobe Epilepsy. What is fascinating is that hard science is not on the side of the materialists. While their speculations are uncritically reported by the media, Andrew Newberg and others have refuted them using the latest brain scan technology (which shows that many parts of the brain are involved in RSMEs) and by national surveys showing that RSMEs are experienced by twenty to forty-nine percent of individuals in the US, Britain, and Australia (71), and so should be assumed to be psychologically normal. As I noted in my debate last year with PZ Myers,¹ this makes it all the more odd that there are so few studies of the psychology and neurology of atheists, who make up a much smaller proportion of the population. What, besides materialistic bias, makes scientists assume that atheists are psychologically normal, without any empirical investigation?

Similarly, Dean Hamer's famous claim to have discovered the "God gene" dissolved under scrutiny. Hamer admitted that not one, but many genes are involved, and that they account for only a tiny amount of variance in "self-transcendence," which, as Carl Zimmer wryly noted, can mean anything from belonging to the Green Party to believing in ESP (52)! As for Michael Persinger's "God helmet"

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experiments, purporting to show that RSMEs can be generated by magnetic fields, these were very likely influenced by suggestion and could not be replicated by Swedish researchers. According to Beauregard and O' Leary, the media are quick to trumpet such flimsy science because they are "skeptical of any idea that spirituality corresponds to anything outside ourselves, but surprisingly gullible about any reductionist explanation of it" (91).

The Achilles Heel of Materialism. If materialistic "explanations" of RSMEs are this bad, it is worth reconsidering whether materialism is true. This is the focus of Chapter 5, which argues that the mind is not identical with the brain. Perhaps the biggest challenge to materialism is what philosopher David Chalmers has called the "hard problem of consciousness": if the brain's material properties are impersonal and objective, why does each individual have a unique, subjective point-of-view? Neuroscience has not made this philosophical conundrum any easier: "No single brain area is active when we are conscious and idle when we are not. Nor does a specific level of activity in neurons signify that we are conscious. Nor is there a chemistry in neurons that always indicates consciousness" (109). The hard problem is so hard that rather than abandon materialism, scientists have implausibly suggested that consciousness is an insignificant epiphenomenon (a byproduct of the brain with no influence on behavior) and even that it does not exist!

Beauregard and O' Leary argue persuasively that promissory materialism can function as a major impediment to scientific research because it prefers to deny or trivialize problematic phenomena rather than investigate them on their own terms. What is more, materialistic accounts of human cognition tend to undermine their own credentials. In his book *How the Mind Works*, Steven Pinker claimed that "our brains were shaped for fitness, not for truth" (122), but since false beliefs can be useful, there is no reason to suppose that scientists with such brains are equipped to discover the truth about anything, including brains. A philosophical connection, which the book might have emphasized more, is with the Argument from Reason, originating in the third chapter of C. S. Lewis's *Miracles*, and developed in great sophistication by philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Victor Reppert. According to this argument, the whole framework of Evolutionary Naturalism removes the ground for having confidence in human reason, since our capacities are shaped by the basic needs of survival, not for their ability to access theoretical truths in science or philosophy. This implies, however, that if Evolutionary Naturalism is true, no one could have good reason to believe it, which is about the best reason one could expect for not believing in Evolutionary Naturalism in the first place.

Making Mind Matter More. What is the alternative to materialism? What would it mean for science if the mind were taken seriously in its own right? These questions are the focus of Chapter 6. Beauregard and O'Leary provide several neuroscientific arguments to show that the mind is not impotent, but can exert a top-down influence on the brain. Jeff Schwartz's work on Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder showed that patients can reprogram their brain by the mental action of consciously refocusing on alternative noncompulsive behaviors. Beauregard and his doctoral student Johanne Lévesque showed that men are capable of regulating their response to erotic material and that people can learn to suppress reactions of sadness. Other studies focus on a mind-based therapy for arachnophobia, and the placebo effect, which "depends specifically on the patient's mental belief and expectation that a specific remedy will work" (141). There is strong evidence that confidence in physicians (and their prescribed course of treatment) improves a patient's health outcomes. Beauregard and O'Leary note, furthermore, there is also a powerful nocebo effect, according to which loss of confidence in a treatment tends to be self-fulfilling. For example, it turns out that, though unconscious, anaesthetized patients process statements during surgery and it makes a difference to the outcome whether the doctor says "go home and get well" rather than "this is the best I could do." To account for such phenomena Beauregard suggests a non materialistic theory, the "psychoneural translation hypothesis," according to which "conscious and unconscious mental processes are automatically translated into neural processes" (151).

Materialists often claim that the mind must reduce to the brain because the mind cannot exist

without the brain. Beauregard and O’Leary counter this by citing extensive scientific study of Near Death Experiences (NDEs), recollections by patients of events that occurred when they were clinically dead. Typical NDEs include an out-of-body experience, a holographic life review, an encounter with deceased relatives or friends, a return to the body, and long-term consequences for the rest of one’s life, including increased compassion and a disappearance of the fear of death. Most remarkable is the accurate reporting of circumstances surrounding the surgery (or other facts about the hospital) that could not have been witnessed by normal conscious sight. While NDEs do not typically support a specific religion, they do offer support for a supernatural realm, for the existence of the soul as distinct from the body, and for life after physical death. Some materialists suggest that NDEs developed as useful survival mechanisms, but this cannot be true, as NDEs have only been possible very recently due to “high-tech interventions” (164). Later in the book, the authors also argue that an alternative to the materialist idea that the brain generates thoughts is to compare the brain to a receiver that “transmits and expresses mental processes/events” (292). It is true that a damaged telephone receiver won’t emit a voice, but that does not show it generates the voice; likewise the fact that brain damage precludes expression of thoughts does not show that the brain generates them.

Chapters 7 through 9 are an in-depth study of mysticism. The authors point out that materialists often do not bother to carefully define mystical experience since they have already dismissed it as an illusion. As a corrective, Chapter 7 provides a helpful survey of serious investigation of mysticism, citing such scholars as W. T. Stace, William James, Evelyn Underhill, Alister Hardy, and R. M. Hood. It also shows the inadequacy of several major attempts to explain away RSMEs offered by evolutionary psychology. The claim that RSMEs are in the interest of our “selfish genes” not only dodges the question of whether any RSMEs convey insights into reality, but is also completely untestable, because we could only determine the differential fitness of RSMEs if, contrary to fact, our ancestors had never exercised reproductive self-control. Likewise, the claim that RSMEs result from “memes” (discrete memorable units) and so can be explained by “cultural evolution” cannot be used to discredit religion without also undermining scientific rationality itself. In Chapter 8, the authors show that RSMEs, unlike hallucinations, often produce positive, life-long trans formative effects and are associated with good physical and mental health as well as socially constructive behaviors. Chapter 9 reports an in-depth study of the mystical experiences of Carmelite nuns. The study undercuts “God-spot” views with clear evidence that “RSMEs are neurally instantiated by different brain regions involved in a variety of functions” (274).

This book is well documented, up-to-date, and engages rival, materialistic views in convincing depth. Unlike many popular science books, it is also clearly written and refreshingly witty. Given the deluge of books attempting to discredit religion and to reduce human beings to machines made of meat, this volume is a welcome salvo in the opposite direction. Those who think that science has become too captive to secularism will be cheered by this book’s rousing critique of materialism and its defense of higher things.

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notes

1 See http://www.arn.org/bogs/index.php/3/2008/04/24/neuroscience_debate_pz_myers_vs_angus_me. The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary (HarperCollins, 2007)