

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

Chrtc 390 Reflection and Discussion Questions by Paul Flaman

Module 1: Respective Methods of Neuroscience and Christian Theology

1. What are the assumptions of most neuroscientists? Is each necessary or optional, and why?
2. Must someone who takes neuroscience seriously be a materialist? Explain.
3. What are some different views today of the Bible (cf. Lecture), of Jesus Christ (cf. Karl Rahner)? Which views are closest to your own, and why?
4. What is theology? Christian theology? What are some ways that Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant forms of Christianity are similar and different?
5. What fundamental human and theological questions does the great 20th Century theologian Von Balthasar raise? How would you answer these questions?
6. Outline the ways in which Polkinghorne views the interaction of science and theology/religion. What position(s) does he lean towards, and why?
7. How are the methods/assumptions of neuroscience and Christian theology different? Are there any similarities? Discuss both in the light of what Polkinghorne calls critical realism.
- *8. What critiques and challenges do the disciplines of neuroscience and Christian theology pose to each other? Are these disciplines complementary? Is there a unity of knowledge and truth?**

Module 2: Human Nature and Personhood: An Historical Overview

1. How have human beings understood themselves in the past with regard to their “nature” or essential “properties”?
2. How has the term “person” been understood and/or defined by various philosophers and Christian theologians? How would you define “person”?
3. What are some contemporary understandings of human nature and personhood?
4. How are understandings of human nature and personhood relevant to law and ethics?

Module 3: Origin of Human Persons: Creation and/or Evolution

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

1. How should we interpret the first chapters of the Bible with regard to God's creation, especially human beings? Are Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis contradictory in parts or fully complementary? Was there an historical Adam and Eve? Did their personal sin result in a "fallen" human condition or is there some other explanation for the various evils we humans experience? Do the biblical accounts of creation teach us anything relevant with regard to understanding ourselves as persons and our relationships with God, each other and the rest of creation? Can an educated person today still believe these accounts are inspired by God?

2. Can a person of faith believe that humankind evolved? How might we reconcile the belief that God created humankind in God's image and scientific evidence for human evolution?

***3. Christian accounts of God's creation and scientific theories of the big bang and evolution both explain the origin of the universe and human persons. Discuss this in the light of a few different models of the interaction of science and religion. What model do you find most satisfactory? Why?**

4. What do you think of Pope John Paul II's conclusions with regard to evolution and Christian faith, especially his concepts of a physical continuity and an ontological leap?

5. If you believe that God created the universe including human beings, how do you understand God and God's relationship to creation and human persons today?

Module 4: Status of Animals and Artificially Intelligent Systems

1. Historically how have we viewed animals in the light of questions of personhood?

2. What defines a person?

-Is it having an immaterial soul?

-Is it certain properties, like consciousness, self-awareness, 'mind', capacity to be a moral agent, capacity to have a relationship with God?

***3. Do other animal species have "minds"? Consciousness? Self-awareness?**

-Do animals experience qualia (subjective experience)? Are qualia immaterial?

-Is the difference between us and animals quantitative (a difference only in *amount*) or qualitative (a difference in *kind*)?

-Should we regard any other animals as persons? Why or why not?

4. How should we treat other animals?

-For food, clothing, tools, research (e.g. medical—testing chemotherapies, basic scientific, cosmetic—spraying hairspray in rabbits' eyes), trophy hunting, entertainment, pets?

-Do animals have rights? All animals, or just some?

-Does a being need to be a moral agent to have rights? Responsibilities?

-Does our treatment of animals reflect our character as persons?

-e.g., to treat an animal with kindness or cruelty?

***5. Could an artificial system (e.g., computer, robot) have a mind? Personhood?**

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

***6. What about human-machine and human-animal hybrids (e.g., fusing chimp/human embryos)? Would such hybrids be persons?**

7. What role does context (relationships, community, culture, environment) have on personhood?

8. Do animals go to heaven? Have souls?

Module 5: The Beginning and End of an Individual Human Being's (Person's) Life

***1. When do you think you began to be a human person? Before fertilization as a pre-existing soul (cf. reincarnation); before fertilization in the mind of God; at fertilization; at some point after fertilization but before birth is complete; when birth is complete; later on in infancy or childhood; you are still not fully a person? How would you justify your view?**

2. Does your position on when personhood begins affect your views on non-therapeutic research on embryos, on abortion, on treatment of infants (e.g., anencephalic infants) born with serious birth defects?

***3. How would you define death? What criterion of determining the time of death do you think is most reasonable? Why?** Does your view of when death occurs affect your position on allowing to die and/or active euthanasia?

4. Compare and contrast the features of the beginning and end of the life of a human person in this world.

5. Are there any similarities and differences in the evolution of life on this planet and the development of a human embryo / fetus / child?

***6. What features or characteristics are relevant to the worth/value/dignity of a human person?**

a) her/his/its nature or essence as a being;

b) her/his/its relationships with other persons and God;

c) her/his/its present functional abilities (e.g. present ability to be sentient, conscious, have subjective experiences and feelings, self-aware, have a sense of self-identity, reason, think, communicate, to relate to other persons, act as a moral agent, etc.);

d) her/his/its potentialities (e.g., to develop such capacities);

e) some other criteria;

f) a combination of one or more of the above?

7. In the light of these issues, how would you define "human being" and "person"? What does it mean for human beings to be created in "the image of God"?

8. Is all life sacred? All *human* life? Why or why not?

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

9. Does neuroscience help us to answer these questions? Do you think some have used science inappropriately in discussing these issues?
10. Do philosophy and Christian theology help to answer these questions?
11. What model of interaction between science including neuroscience and religion (especially Christian theology) do you think is most helpful with regard to these and other issues?

Module 6: The Possibility of Life after Death

1. Why have some philosophers and religions concluded or believed that the human soul is immaterial and immortal?
2. How should we interpret biblical data with regard to bodily resurrection (Jesus' and ours)? As a myth; metaphorically; early Christians' hallucinatory experiences; historical events; events that transcend history; events that are both historical and transcendental? If you believe in Jesus' real bodily resurrection, where is Jesus including his risen body now? If you also believe in Mary's bodily assumption (cf. Catholic teaching), where is she now?
3. What do you think of the theological traditions on heaven and hell, and the Catholic view of purgatory? What determines "where" one goes when one dies?
4. Do you believe in both an individual judgment when a person dies, as well as a last general judgment by God? Do you believe in the Second Coming of Jesus and God's establishing a "new heaven and earth"? If so, how do you understand these?
5. Do you believe in praying for the dead? Can deceased human beings (e.g. saints) pray for us? Do you think that miracles related to the canonization of a saint confirm not only his or her sanctity but also that he or she is now conscious and can intercede (pray) for us? Do such miracles confirm the immateriality or transcendence of the human soul?
6. What is the best way to interpret the scientific data with regard to "near death" experiences? -- Merely a product of the brain; evidence that consciousness and memory can be independent of the brain; other?
- *7. Is there any realistic basis to hope that one can continue to exist as a person after death, including the total and irreversible cessation of all one's brain functions? Explain.**
8. How should we interpret the claims of mediums who say they often contact the dead / "spirits"? Is it ethical to try to do this?
9. Are there any other paranormal phenomena that support belief in life after death?
10. Do you think plants and/or animals go to heaven and/or will there be plants and animals in the "new heaven and earth"?

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

Module 7: Brain Disorders / Mental Illness

1. If neuroscience shows that mental illnesses are rooted in the brain, what does this imply about our understanding of the nature of persons?

2. Brain disorders and/or mental illnesses such as serious depression, schizophrenia and Alzheimer's can also have a serious effect on the person's view of God, faith and behavior. E.g., a person of strong Christian faith and virtue who develops such a disorder/illness may now exhibit some quite contrary behaviors. Comment on the person's culpability in the light of the distinction in Christian theology of considering morality both objectively and subjectively.

3. If a drug like Prozac can help some people believe in a loving kind God again (e.g., Mark Parent), what are the implications of such drugs for Christians and for those who do not believe in God?

4. In the light of the above, how do the biological, psychological, ethical and spiritual dimensions of human persons interrelate? [Note: I have moved this up from the first part of what I had for what was question n. 5 below (now n. 6) and adapted it to fit into the context here. Perhaps this question is clearer here? This question was related to the first part of the reading by Ashley and O'Rourke from our old coursepack 113-16. From the original source by Ashely and O'Rourke about 12 pages are left out (from pp. 364-76 in *Health Care Ethics*). The second part that we had in the coursepack 117-25 relates to the other question in what was n. 5 below.]

*5. Peter Singer argues against human beings having any special dignity or sanctity of life as compared to other sentient animals. He also believes that some healthy animals have more personhood than some human beings with undeveloped brains or with severely damaged brains. **Why do some Christians still defend the sanctity of life of all human beings, including those with severe brain disorders or damage, and their having a greater dignity than other animals? Does neuroscientific research linking human experience to the brain have any relevance to or influence on theological understandings of the special dignity of humans?**

6. Do you consider some forms of brain research and therapy or treatment for mental illness to be unethical? Why or why not?

7. Do the biblical and Christian theological themes of creation, sin and redemption have anything to offer with regard to our understanding of brain disorders and mental illness, and the value of human persons suffering from these?

Module 8: Gender Issues and Sex Roles

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

1. It is obvious that men and women differ. How deep and broad are those differences? Is limiting the innate differences between men and women to the biological a symptom of a kind of Cartesian dualism which fails to appreciate properly our nature as embodied persons?
2. What is the source of these differences? Are they unlearned (i.e., present from conception/birth or at least inevitably emergent--such as in secondary sex characteristics at puberty)? Are they learned (culture, experience)? To what extent? Can they be changed?
3. In the light of the "societies" of great apes and human evolution, is the widespread patriarchal and hierarchical organization of human societies innate and/or cultural?
4. How should we evaluate gender differences/similarities? Consider also intersexuality and sexual orientation. Are they part of the diversity of God's good creation? Are they a reflection of brokenness, sinfulness, or even the general "incompleteness" of creation? If so, to what extent?
5. Is Eph 5:21-33 (and other similar New Testament passages) sexist? Can we still look at such passages as the inspired Word of God today? Which interpretation do you prefer and why: traditional Christian, feminist/revisionist, progressive/mutual submission? What do you think is important regarding the roles/responsibilities of husbands / fathers and wives / mothers?
6. Were the Jewish and early Christian exclusively male priesthoods countercultural? What is the significance, if any, of the facts of Jesus being a male human being and choosing twelve male apostles? Should these be interpreted as part of God's eternal infinitely wise plan or accommodations to the culture of the time? Should the Catholic and Orthodox Churches follow other churches in ordaining women (note that many Protestant churches do not have priests or bishops) as priests and bishops? Has Pope John Paul II definitively settled the matter for the Catholic Church?
7. What are some of the contributions of feminism, of Christian feminist theologians? With regard to different kinds of feminism (e.g., some who promote complete egalitarianism vs. some who think true liberation appreciates the differences of men and women), what views do you see as compatible or incompatible with Christianity? What can change and what can not change or should not change with regard to Christianity? By what criteria?
- *8. Can neuroscience help to settle theological controversies with regard to the roles of men and women or help to mediate between them?**
9. Is Christian teaching regarding lifetime monogamous marriage supported by neuroscientific findings?
10. In the light of some very serious divisions within Christianity regarding gender / sexual issues and roles, how can we contribute to the unity of Christians for which Jesus prayed (see Jn 17:21)?

Module 9: Sexual Orientation and Behavior

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

1. How do you think biblical passages concerning homosexual genital acts should be interpreted and applied today? What are some different conclusions and approaches of various Christian churches / theologians with regard to the morality of same-sex genital acts, ordaining gay or lesbian pastors and celebrating same-sex blessings or marriages? Is it a violation of human rights for a traditional Christian organization to fire someone who openly advocates a gay lifestyle contrary to the institution's beliefs? What approach do you think is most faithful to following Jesus, to loving as he loves?

2. What do you think is the cause of the homosexual orientation?

-biological: genetic and/or hormonal and/or neural and/or

-environmental: related to a disorder in the relationship with one or both parents in early childhood, negative or positive sexual experiences, socialization

and/or

-a free choice?

3. Do you think a homosexual person *can* become heterosexual through therapy and / or God's healing power (or vice versa)? Should persons with homosexual inclinations accept themselves as they are, or should they seek to become heterosexual through therapy, prayer and/or some other means?

***4. Is neuroscience relevant to theological understandings of gender and sexuality? Should scientific data influence our theological views on this topic, and vice versa? Is it possible that science could produce results that would exclude one or more theological views of human gender and sexuality?**

5. Should civil law provide for marriage, spousal benefits or other benefits for same-sex couples? Should a gay or lesbian couple be allowed to adopt children? Should a lesbian be able to be artificially inseminated? Is it in the best interests of children to be raised within a loving committed heterosexual marriage, by both their mother and father together? Can science including neuroscience help society to answer such questions?

Module 10: Extraordinary Religious Experience

1. Extraordinary religious experiences are often linked with, or are a manifestation of, neural pathologies. Discuss the implications of this observation for our understanding of the nature and legitimacy of extraordinary religious experiences.

2. Some neuroscientists, e.g., Michael Persinger, consider all extraordinary religious experiences to be hallucinations or delusions reflecting mental illness and/or miniseizures in the brain. Do the data of neuroscience require such an interpretation? What can a Christian theological approach contribute to our understanding of these extraordinary religious experiences? Among other things, consider the biblical prophetic tradition, charisms, private revelations (class lecture), various mystical phenomena and Aumann's criteria for discernment of spirits.

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

3. How do you think biblical data with regard to angels (messengers of God) and demons/the devil/Satan (angels who rebelled against God) should be interpreted? Do they reflect the language of mythology to personify evil; or are they real intelligent spiritual/immaterial beings/persons created by God; or other?

***4. According to the principle of parsimony if one has an adequate explanation for some phenomenon, one should not posit the existence of some other reality to explain the phenomenon. Do you think all extraordinary religious experiences including “miracles” can be, or eventually will be, adequately explained in terms of physical entities and processes including the human brain? Or, is it necessary (does it make more sense) to posit the existence of non-physical beings such as God, angels, demons, the spirits (souls) of humans who have died ... to explain at least some extraordinary religious phenomena?**

5. If a nonmaterial God exists, does it make more sense to explain revelations from God as involving God acting only on the physical including a human person’s brain since ontologically we are only physical, or does it make more sense to understand ourselves as having an immaterial soul as a means of our contact with God?

Module 11: Ordinary Religious Experience

1. What are the characteristics of “ordinary” religious experiences? What does the evolution paradigm contribute to our understanding of these experiences? Does this affect our understanding of their character and “reality”? Do religions have any survival or pragmatic value for human beings? Do religions provide human beings with real answers or only illusions with regard to the human search for the ultimate meaning of life?

2. What are some of the main themes in Christian theology with regard to ordinary religious experiences? How do some neuroscientists understand ordinary religious experiences? Are the approaches of theology and neuroscience in conflict or complementary here? Is a phenomenology of religious experience helpful in mediating between these disciplines here? What are the contributions and limits of each of these approaches?

3. In what ways do you think the religious experiences of Christians and people of other religions (e.g., Buddhists) are similar and/or different? Do you think the *mystical experiences* of people of different religions are more similar than the *rituals and doctrines* of their respective religions?

***4. Are religions a product of human brains or are our brains wired so that we can experience God? Are human persons created in the image of God or have we created God in our image?**

5. Do you agree with the Apostle Paul that a person gains nothing if they have eloquence, knowledge (e.g., a vast knowledge of neuroscience and theology), power and so forth but do not have agape love (see 1 Cor 13; cf. also the reading by Nouwen)? Discuss.

Discussion and Study Questions for SJC Chrtc 390/TKUC Psys 494

Module 12: Mind/Brain, Body/Soul, Personal Relatedness Issues

1. How do you understand the terms body/soul and mind/brain? Does “mind” mean the same thing as “soul”?

2. Do mental phenomena including human consciousness and self-awareness, free will, attention and/or memory require the existence of an immaterial or spiritual mind/soul interacting with one’s brain/body? Are human qualia (subjective experiences) embodied and/or immaterial? Do friendship, love, intimacy and communion between persons transcend bodies and brains and/or require a spiritual dimension to human persons?

3. Do the findings of neuroscience with regard to the “tightening” links between mind and brain exclude a duality of substance with regard to mind/brain, body/soul?

*4. The lectures and readings present a number of perspectives on the mind/brain body/soul issue: 1) radical two-substance dualism, 2) dualistic interactionism, 3) holistic dualism/Thomism, 4) non-reductive physicalism, 5) emergent monism, 6) process philosophy/theology, 7) functionalism and 8) eliminative / reductive materialism. Can you describe and critically evaluate each one? **Do the data of neuroscience exclude and/or support any of these models? Which approach, if any, do you think best fits biblical data and teaching properly understood?** Does Catholic teaching, including that of an intermediate state of the human soul between bodily death and bodily resurrection and the intercession of the saints, exclude nonreductive physicalism and/or emergent monism? **Which model (s) of the mind-brain / body-soul, and human persons in relationships, best fits human experience, in your view? Why?**

5. Do you think that we human beings will ever be able to understand these issues completely? Discuss in light of the Apostle Paul’s saying: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see fact to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”(1 Cor 13:12)

Conclusion: Other Issues / Questions

1. With regard to this course on neuroscience, the person and Christian theology, do you think there are any other relevant topics or questions which we have not discussed? If so, what are they?