

## Letters

“Organisms develop internal systems of evaluation that free them from the brutal life-or-death judgment of natural selection. Crucially, all these systems are informational. Meaning becomes the currency of cognition” (p. 67).

Mitchell walks us through increasingly complex organisms like the hydra and *C. elegans*, and then those with bigger brains, nervous systems, and sensory equipment. We see the rudiments of self-knowledge developing when organisms must be able to distinguish between changes to the immediate environment they have made, versus similar changes made by other organisms. This is not yet the sort of free will that we have, but it is the development of subjective agency, which is another building block for full-blown free will.

Also necessary is that the future is genuinely open. For this, Mitchell leans on an interpretation of time and quantum physics developed by Lee Smolin and Clelia Verde in which what we experience as the present, is simply the transition from the indefinite possibilities of the future to the definite and unchangeable past. The present complete state of a physical system does not fully predict the next state of that system, and that opens the door for “higher-level features to have some causal influence in determining which way the physical system will evolve” (p. 164). My one course in quantum physics more than two decades ago doesn’t qualify me to evaluate this interpretation.

The “higher-level features” Mitchell points to are called organizational structures or the functional architecture of the organism. This is where he loses me. He moves from control systems of greater complexity to a sense of self, to higher-level functional architectures that are responsible for choosing among possible options. Over and over, he emphasizes (rightly, to my mind) that it is not neurons or brains that have free will, it is the organism as a whole that does. But I don’t see how that has been scientifically explained.

Mitchell has made an important point (which Sapolsky misses) about the categories of life being fundamentally different from nonlife. But now I wonder whether Mitchell has not quite recognized the importance of the third Big Bang: sentience. This too is a different ontological category (though, again, it might come in degrees and resist stark dividing lines), and therefore necessitates different categories of explanation. That doesn’t mean you need something more than matter to make it work, any more than we need something more than matter to make life work. But I am not persuaded that we get free will and moral responsibility explained by functional architectures.

Free will is a capacity of sentient beings, and both free will and sentience have so far resisted scientific explanation

(the latter being called the “hard problem” of consciousness). Maybe they won’t always resist, but even if they do, that shouldn’t make us doubt free will any more than we doubt sentience.

*Reviewed by Jim Stump, vice president of programs at BioLogos and host of their Language of God podcast. Jim’s latest book is The Sacred Chain: How Understanding Evolution Leads to Deeper Faith (HarperOne, 2024).*

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### Gender Nonconformity in the Next Life

In the article by Haarsma et al., “Congenital Disabilities and Gender Nonconforming Identities as Parts of God’s Intended Creation” (*PSCF* 76, no. 3 [December 2024]: 190–206), the authors build a case for acceptance of the disabled in the Christian community, especially for individuals with gender nonconformity. Their calling this to our attention is to be applauded. Haarsma et al. frequently suggested that a postlapsarian viewpoint has prejudiced the view of disabilities; they make a good scientific case for disabilities existing before Adam and Eve sinned. They further suggest that variation, largely due to mutation, is necessary for evolution to occur and is to be appreciated. However, they take some positions that I consider inconsistent with and misunderstanding of the evangelical church. (I felt it necessary to consult a specific, modern document, that of my church Christ Community Evangelical Free Church (EFC) “Exploring God’s Design for Male and Female Flourishing in the Church,” not at all suggesting it is representative of all evangelical churches or of all churches represented in the ASA. Gender nonconformity is mentioned with compassion, but no specific connection to anyone’s sin is mentioned.)

We have all observed that insensitive Christians often ask well-meaning questions, but I think that the authors have exaggerated the degree this happens as a result of a mistaken belief that disabilities are due to the Fall in Genesis. I doubt that the average church-goer is concerned about theodicy when they offer to pray for a disabled brother or sister. The authors regret “mistaken pity” (p. 197) for the disabled; however, arguably “pity” is what motivates the use of adaptive technology for the deaf to hear and the blind to see.

The most obvious cases of gender nonconformity are genetic and apparent at birth or at least by puberty. Gender dysphoria has not been studied enough to know the causes but perhaps is due to brain anatomy and function, so that the individual’s assigned sex at birth is not how they view themselves. Some may want physical or

psychological intervention. It seems to me that conforming to one sex or the other is a valid choice.

Haarsma et al. discussed eunuchs who were born that way as being gender nonconforming. If the individual wants to stay in a nonbinary condition and serve God, living a devoted single life certainly has the approval of Jesus in his call for the eunuchs who chose that way for the sake of the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, the eunuch by commitment must be joyful in service as a spiritual discipline; unfortunately, the quoted passage on the top of p. 194 stings with sarcasm. “‘God wants to heal you!’ She is undoubtedly thrilled by this opportunity ... She doesn’t have the intimacy that prayer or accountability or sarcasm require.” Is it not possible to assume the best about the questioner and possibly build the intimacy? Eunuchs are offered a reward in Isaiah 56, as noted by Haarsma et al. and the authors of the EFC document noted above.

Will Jesus heal the disabled in the next life? Let us consider Jesus’s first coming. Jesus opened his ministry in Luke 4 by saying he had come to bring sight to the blind. Jesus offered a choice to disabled individuals prior to most of his healing miracles. Most of them wanted the cure. There appeared to be no limit to what Jesus could do. The man born blind in John 9 was healed and could see; whereas, even with modern medicine, children who are born blind and have surgery later cannot adjust to the experience of sight and prefer blindness. Jesus must be able to rewire the brain. In Mark 8, the blind man got sight in two stages: firstly, he saw what he thought were trees walking about; and, secondly, he had full sight.

Haarsma et al. seem to suggest that some disabled individuals may not want to be healed (p. 193, top of right-hand column), thereby choosing to retain their identity, even in the next life (p. 198). It is true that Jesus’s resurrected body bore his scars but that was to show Thomas that he was the same Jesus as was crucified. We surely take with us our memories that were conditioned by our genes and our neuroanatomy, but we will have a new body. Paul deals with the question of the resurrected body in 1 Corinthians 15:38, “But God gives it a body as he has determined and to each kind of seed its own body.” All of God’s seeds together will be a perfect garden.

Stephen Reinbold  
ASA member

### The Authors Reply to Stephen Reinbold

We thank Stephen Reinbold for his thoughtful letter and his spirit of promoting discussion. He asks, “Will Jesus heal the disabled in the next life?” We agree that there is much we do not know about what form our resurrection

bodies will take. What concerns us in this article is harm caused in *this* life by common beliefs that all congenital disabilities resulted from the marring of God’s creation by sin.

Imagine a young Christian with a congenital disability absorbing the default teaching of their church that—although they are not culpable for their condition and although the church loves and supports them—they are fundamentally flawed; they are not what they *ought* to be; they would not exist as they do if humans had not sinned. Now imagine that same young Christian raised in a church that teaches that—although their disability causes them difficulties—they are *already* fully human; they are part of God’s intended diversity for humanity; their unique gifts and full participation are valued; they are accepted as they are even as the church supports them in whatever healing they might or might not seek in this life or the next.

Stephen points out that individual Christians might mean well when they say insensitive things. We agree. Poor theology can lead well-intentioned Christians to do harmful things, including many that have harmed disabled individuals both individually and structurally. As we point out in the article, our collective views of eschatology shape the world we build now, including its social structures and dynamics. Few denominations might formally teach that congenital disabilities are a result of sin, but such lay beliefs are commonplace, and there is no shortage of books and articles that make this claim.<sup>1</sup> We hope more Christians will discuss this. If our article is on the right track, churches could teach their members that at least some congenital disabilities are part of God’s intended diversity for humanity. Better theology might prompt the same loving intentions to produce better action.

There is a parallel situation with gender nonconforming identities. (To be clear, we do *not* think gender nonconformity is itself a disability.) As Stephen’s letter points out—and as several individuals on the “diving deeper” discussion pointed out—there is a wide variety of types and causes of gender nonconforming identity. Even within the narrower category of transgender individuals, there is a wide variety. One person might have known from before puberty that their psychological gender, and the social gender identity they desire, is at odds with their anatomical sex. Another person might have been cis-gender through mid-puberty, then entered a time of uncertainty, and after discerning for a while might have decided that they are non-binary (some such individuals, but not all, develop a clearer gender identity as they age).

Our question is this: What should churches teach to, and about, such individuals? Again, imagine a young