

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2017

Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, UK

Short Papers Session 2, Room 3

Gavin Merrifield

This was an interesting pair of papers that examined the more physical aspects of mental health and the mind.

Sarah Lane Richie from the University of St. Andrews amply broadened the audience's horizons with a fascinating talk on the nascent field of the gut microbiome and how this may be able to effect mental states and conditions. And because of this how it may change our view of ourselves and how we think about ourselves. As with any new field of research some results need further exploration to gauge their full effects on complex disease and behaviour but it's great to see a theologian getting to grips with this new area – and being enthused by the possibilities! Gut bacteria..? Theologically significant? Oh yes.

In the second paper Emmanuel Nartey provided an overview of challenging ideas from the field of experimental neuroscience. These included the infamous Libet experiments on mental causation (often used to dismiss the existence of free will), a brief discussion of the zombies of David Chalmers and fMRI studies of the Trolley Problem. A broad range of research to say the least! These led on to a full discussion of the theological views of the human person and how these different viewpoints might interact or dismiss these apparent challenges to traditional theistic thinking on free will and personal accountability.

It was great to see both papers both well grounded in the current literature and so how there can be a healthy discussion between the interpretations of the science involved and theology. Even better was how the speakers linked these somewhat more reductive discussions to the positive well being and self-understanding of humans as individuals and communities.