

Panel Proposal for the 2015 ISSR Meetings at the AAR  
Atlanta, GA

Panel Title

"Against Empathy?: Theological Interrogation of Neuroscientific Debates on the Existence of the Human Mirror Neuron System and the Moral Significance of Empathy"

Panel Participants

Michael Spezio, Scripps College, UKE Hamburg, Caltech (mspezio@scrippscollege.edu)

Celia Deane-Drummond, Notre Dame (Celia.Deane-Drummond.1@nd.edu)

Anne Runehov, Uppsala University, Sweden (anne.runehov@teol.uu.se)

Charlene Burns, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire (burnscp@uwec.edu)

Gregory Peterson, South Dakota State University (Greg.Peterson@sdstate.edu)

Panel Description

Social neuroscience is embroiled in two major controversies with implications for whether empathy and imitation/*imitatio* matter for understanding the evolution of human sociality and language, and the formation of human morality. The primary and larger controversy surrounds the existence of mirror neurons in humans and whether they play any role at all in two critically important aspects of alloprimate and hominin evolution: perceiving the emotions, intentions, and goals of other members of one's species and those of closely related species, and the evolution of animal communication and language. Mirror neuron theory serves as a central pillar of some influential accounts stressing embodied cognition of social understanding and of the evolution of language. The other controversy – equally of intense interest to moral theologians and philosophers – is whether the brain encodes empathy separately from "cognitive" forms of compassion and from concepts of justice in action. If so, then empathy could be viewed as at best irrelevant and at worst destructive of moral formation beyond one's immediate ingroup. The panel will present accessible accounts of these arguments and some neuroscientific counterarguments, and will raise philosophical questions along with theological interrogation of these controversies, with a view to the possibility of raising new directions for neuroscientific and theological research.

Relevant Works

\* Bloom, Paul. "The case against empathy," *The New Yorker*, 20 May, 2013.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/20/the-baby-in-the-well>

\* Deane-Drummond, Celia. "Evolutionary Perspectives on Inter-Morality and Inter-Species Relationships Interrogated in Light of the Rise and Fall of *Homo sapiens sapiens*," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3(2014)72.

\* Deane-Drummond, Celia. "Are animals moral? A theological appraisal of the evolution of vice and virtue," *Zygon* 44(2009)932.

\* Hickok, Gregory. *The Myth of Mirror Neurons: The real neuroscience of communication and cognition* (New York, NY: W W Norton & Co, 2014)

\* Keyzers, Christian. "The straw man in the brain," *Science* 347(2015)240.

\* Runehov, Anne. "*Imago Dei* and *Simulatio* or *Imitatio Dei*: a philosophical essay on empathy," *Theology & Science* 10(2012)411.

\* Spezio, Michael. "Embodied cognition and loving character: empathy and character in moral formation," *Philosophy, Theology, and the Sciences*, in press.

\* Venezia, Jonathan H. & Gregory Hickok. "Mirror neurons, the motor system, and language: from the motor theory to embodied cognition and beyond," *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3(2009)1403.