



2017

Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist

Blake T. Ostler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ostler, Blake T. (2017) "Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 56 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Steven L. Peck. *Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist*. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2015.

Reviewed by Blake T. Ostler

Evolving Faith is a remarkable book within the context of Latter-day Saint faith. Steven L. Peck has put together a marvelously readable book that addresses some of the most difficult philosophical issues confronting not only Mormons, but all people. The expertise of Peck's discussion of philosophical issues is quite surprising because Peck is a professor of biology, not philosophy, at Brigham Young University. He addresses the relationship between LDS thought and evolution, the mind-body problem, the problem of consciousness, emergence of novelty and ontologically novel life systems, and free will. In addition, he addresses the ecological issues confronting Latter-day Saints, along with approaches for truly reverencing creation.

Peck is at his best addressing issues such as “subjectivity” as an epistemology (theory of knowledge) and the emergence of new realities in biological life systems. He discusses the views of French philosopher Henri Bergson as a critique of “flat naturalism” (or the view that everything happens by random chance). Peck focuses expertly on the important issue of whether there can be a theistic view of evolution and purpose in the seemingly random mutations that drive evolution. I highly recommend his discussion.

Peck also addresses evolution in light of LDS faith. I think this discussion is one of the most informed and instructive available in LDS thought. However, it does not address the issues for those who struggle to reconcile specific scriptural texts with the theory of evolution. He takes a general approach and discusses the reasons for avoiding the scriptural literalism that largely gives rise to the problem in the first place. However, Peck does not explore the specific scriptures that seem to conflict with an evolutionary worldview. He does little to assist the thoughtful Latter-day Saint to actually reduce the cognitive dissonance

arising from the scriptural claims regarding, for instance, no death before the Fall (which some believe occurred right before the six thousand years of the earth's temporal existence) and the millions of years of fossils demonstrated in the geological record.

Notwithstanding the academic acumen demonstrated in the text, the most interesting parts of the book focus on Peck's personal experiences after contracting in Vietnam a brain infection known as *Burkholderia pseudomallei*. As a result, he experienced alternative realities that seemed equally real while fully "conscious." In this world of delusion mixed with reality, there were two versions of his wife and children—a good version and an evil version. He could not distinguish which was "real" because both were equally presented as real to his conscious experience. He finally distinguished the real wife from the alternative evil wife only because he knew his wife did not swear and his evil wife did.

The philosopher in me wants to comment on the epistemology used to detect which world was real (using a coherence theory of truth and background experience as a test). However, such experiences challenge all of our seemingly "empirical experience" and how much of our experience may be a simulation created by our physiological states—leaving us with the unsettling idea that all of our conscious experience is like a dream state. Such *Matrix* experiences suggest that a large part of what we take for granted as real is a simulation created by the neural structures in our brains and central nervous systems. They also suggest that consciousness is dependent in a strong sense on the matter that makes up our biological systems—suggesting a form of mind-body identity materialism. But that is not the route Peck takes.

Peck expertly discusses the various mind-body theories and brain sciences, reviewing functionalist materialism (the view that consciousness is identical to the functions of the brain) and dualist theories (the brain and thinking-soul are two different substances). Peck wisely rejects both and instead suggests that the best fit with the evidence and Latter-day Saint commitments to free will is emergence, the view that consciousness arises on a new level of explanation from the underlying material base of the functioning brain, and it is dependent on the proper functioning of our physical bodies and brain but cannot be reduced to mere matter. Consciousness emerges as a new reality that is not fully explained by the material parts that give rise to it.

Perhaps it is not fair for me to review this work because I agree with virtually every position that Peck takes in the book. His discussion of the "hard problem" of consciousness and brain studies and the various

philosophical positions related to consciousness are exactly those that Latter-day Saints ought to take, in my view, with respect to such issues. It seems to me that viewing the brain and neural systems as a substrate for biological processes that provide the ground for genuinely novel ontological emergence on a new level of reality for consciousness and free will is the best resolution of the mind-body problem available to Latter-day Saints. In addition, his view of purposeful biological processes guided by a Divine mind (called “teleology” by philosophers) as a means of theistic evolution is also the best option for Latter-day Saints with respect to resolving evolution and the faith commitments embodied in Mormon and Judeo-Christian scriptures. Further, it seems to me that his focus on “subjectivity as a way of knowing” is precisely the best option for Latter-day Saints with respect to epistemology, or a theory of knowledge. In all of these discussions, Peck provides a competent, thorough, and enlightening analysis of the various options and why he believes these approaches best fit the Latter-day Saint worldview(s).

It would be difficult for me to recommend this book more highly to the nonspecialized student who wants to have an introduction to the various issues of evolution, the problem of consciousness, and the relationship between faith and science.

Blake T. Ostler received his BA in philosophy and BS in psychobiology from Brigham Young University. He received his JD as a William Leary Scholar from the University of Utah. He has published extensively as a philosopher and theologian, and his three-volume *Exploring Mormon Thought* is a seminal philosophical Mormon treatise.