Engberg-Pedersen’s most recent book is his synthesis of Paul’s worldview with a focus on Paul’s understanding of self, the body, and the pneuma. The fundamental argument that Engberg-Pedersen makes, among many provocative and refreshing observations and conclusions, is that when we read Paul only metaphorically we misunderstand him—particularly in regards to the pneuma.

According to Engberg-Pedersen, Paul has an audacious and radical worldview that is “truly breathtaking” (193). While Paul’s worldview cannot be ours (except by analogy), we should not make our worldview his. The most important thing to recognize about Paul is that he thought in concrete, physical terms much more than the modern mind has recognized. Paul’s constant focus is on body and bodiliness, especially in regard to the pneuma.

Whereas Engberg-Pedersen’s previous works focused on demonstrating the scholarly fallacy of an opposition between Judaism and Greco-Roman philosophy in Paul and on the importance of Greco-Roman philosophy for interpreting the apostle, in this book he maintains these focii while directing his attention toward what he considers is another scholarly mistake: reading Paul only metaphorically. Engberg-Pedersen does not deny
that there is metaphor in Paul, but he thinks there is much that is concrete and physical in what scholars have traditionally taken to be simply metaphor. This is nowhere more arresting and strange than in Paul’s view of the pneuma, which for the apostle is “literally … a physical entity” (53). There are also other aspects of Paul that Engberg-Pedersen thinks should be taken literally, such as “being in Christ’ and ekklesia. These, like the material spirit (which is the root of just about everything Paul says), refer to real, concrete physical entities. One of the constant themes of the book is to “try to take it literally” (162).

The book’s basic methodology is what Engberg-Pedersen calls “philosophical exegesis.” This involves articulating the worldview of the interpreter and attempting to find the “best defensible framework” (2; see also 140) within which to understand Paul. Engberg-Pedersen uses philosophical frameworks from both the world of Paul (particularly Stoicism) and modern philosophy (Bourdieu and Foucault).

In chapter 1 (“A Stoic Understanding of the Pneuma and Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15”), Engberg-Pedersen argues that Paul’s cosmology drew on and presupposed some basic Stoic cosmological ideas. Focusing on Paul’s description of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15, Engberg-Pedersen argues that Paul thought that individual human bodies will be transformed into bodies made up of pneuma at the resurrection. The resurrection will not be a liberation from bodies but a transformation of flesh and blood bodies into pneumatic ones (32). The general resurrection will also result in a new “pneumatic world of eternal life”—a new creation (38). The main insight Engberg-Pedersen gains from his Stoic reading of Paul is that the apostle thought of the pneuma in concrete, bodily terms.

Chapter 2 (“The Bodily Pneuma in Paul”) builds on this conclusion and asks whether it is confirmed elsewhere in Paul. Through a study of Philippians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans, Engberg-Pedersen determines that it is. Engberg-Pedersen then broadens his gaze and asks how this view of the pneuma as a physical entity affects Paul’s understanding of the present life of believers. Engberg-Pedersen finds that Paul thinks that believers receive the same pneumatic power that raised Christ. The reception of the pneuma is a physical event that begins the transformation of the bodies of believers in the present. This transformation will be completed at the resurrection (72). Engberg-Pedersen also makes the point that the bodily pneuma generates believers’ understanding about Christ and that there is no incompatibility in understanding the pneuma as a physical entity and as a cognitive power generating understanding (65): the pneuma is both a physical and a cognitive entity.

Chapter 3 (“Physics, Cognition, and Superhuman Persons”) discusses Paul’s worldview more broadly. Engberg-Pedersen opines that in Paul there is no contrast between the
physicality of the world and its cognitive character (80)—especially in regard to Paul’s conception of the pneuma. The pneuma is physical and cognitive. Paul’s worldview also includes superhumans such as God, Christ, angels, demons, and Satan. The ultimate aim of the chapter is to understand Paul’s anthropology. Engberg-Pedersen concludes that the apostle’s anthropology is that human beings are composed of body and soul (including nous) and are “sarkic” (that is, directed toward death and destruction). For believers, however, body and soul have received an infusion of God’s pneuma and so are in the process of being transformed. Believers can expect that at some point they will be completely separated from sarx.

In the course of this chapter Engberg-Pedersen makes several fascinating exegetical observations on some Pauline passages that have resisted satisfactory interpretations. See, for instance, his reading of the curious distinctions in 1 Cor 2:14–15 regarding “psychic” and the “pneumatic” humans.

In chapter 4 (“Divine and Human Agency and Freedom”) Engberg-Pedersen offers an important alternative to the usual understanding of apocalyptic in Paul. In this regard, apocalyptic is usually understood to stress divine freedom over against human freedom. Engberg-Pedersen views Paul as an apocalypticist, but not in the way this is typically presented. Through a comparative use of Epictetus, Engberg-Pedersen argues that Paul did not regard human freedom and divine freedom as in opposition. Rather, the pneuma generates knowledge of God and so aligns human beings with God. The result is that the agency of believers accords with God’s agency. For believers, there is no opposition between human agency and divine agency, since there is no opposition between human freedom and divine freedom. The freedom (and so the agency) of human beings comes from knowledge of God. This knowledge is generated by physical influx of the pneuma.

In chapter 5 (“From the Self to the Shared”), Engberg-Pedersen seeks to better understand Paul’s worldview by focusing on what can be known of how Paul himself experiences and exhorts others to experience this worldview. Engberg-Pedersen uses Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Foucault’s concept of subjectification in service of looking at what he calls the “inside perspective” (140). Furthermore, Engberg-Pedersen explores Paul’s view of his own self and of his addressees in the context of the rhetorical purpose Paul has for referring to these things. Engberg-Pedersen discusses three aspects of self: Paul’s self-account, Paul’s paraenetic use of that account, and the picture he paints of his converted self. The common thread in all of these aspects of self is the pneuma. In the course of this discussion Engberg-Pedersen claims that “Christ” and the “body of Christ” is the pneuma that lives in the bodies of baptized believers, making them all into a single body (171).
The final chapter ("Bodily Practice") focuses on the significance of Paul’s letter-writing and also compares the Christian self (habitus) with the Jewish habitus of a first century C.E. Pharisee and apocalypticist and with the non-Jewish habitus of an intellectual of the same period and location (eastern half of the Greco-Roman world). Engberg-Pedersen again exhorts readers to take things literally. For instance, he argues that gnosis is for Paul a “pneumatic state of the body of flesh and blood” (181). At the same time, the pneuma is a cognitive state. Engberg-Pedersen calls this the double perspective of cognitive and physical analysis. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Paul’s current relevance. Engberg-Pedersen takes it that the literal aspect of Paul’s understanding of pneuma as a concrete physical entity cannot be taken over in our day.

The volume has a wealth of instructive endnotes concerning both Engberg-Pedersen’s purposes in the book and important scholarship on particular topics. Moreover, there is much valuable and intriguing exegesis in this volume. Engberg-Pedersen offers solutions to some time-worn interpretative problems in Paul, such as the meaning of Christ as a “life-producing pneuma” (1 Cor 15:45), the distinction between psychic and pneumatic in 1 Cor 2, the meaning of the stoichea in Gal 4, and of “being in Christ.” Furthermore, Engberg-Pedersen presents significant opinions on some central matters in Paul. In particular, Engberg-Pedersen’s discussion of divine and human agency and freedom is very fine and offers both an excellent critique of our modern view of the relationship here and a compelling presentation of Paul’s opinion.

While Engberg-Pedersen puts the book forward as a unity by introducing it with three profiles (he describes it as arguing for the importance of taking both a metaphorical and a literal perspective on Paul, as using philosophical exegesis, and as focusing on bodiliness as essential to Paul), in the end the book reads more like what it is: a revision of five previously published essays. Each of these essays is brilliant and noteworthy in its own right. The book as whole, however, strains to be a unity. The enigmatic title reflects the contents of the book: it is about cosmology and about the self and about the pneuma. The reader, however, is challenged to see how the different chapters discussing these themes are essentially related.

There is much that cannot here be discussed about Engberg-Pedersen’s philosophical exegetical method (at times Engberg-Pedersen uses Stoicism as a comparator and at others he claims that Paul presupposed and was influenced by Stoicism) and about Engberg-Pedersen’s opinion concerning the irrelevance for our day of Paul’s conviction about the concrete character of the pneuma (there are many contemporary Christians who do take literally Paul’s literalism in this regard). The book’s collection of Engberg-Pedersen’s thought is not to be missed. He offers here, once again, wise and creative and provocative opinions on matters at the heart of understanding Paul.