

## **Neither the one nor the other**

The neuroscientists cannot help us with evil, because in most cases it emanates from a defective mind rather than a defective brain – and all the king's evolutionary psychologists and all the king's experimental philosophers cannot make this elementary distinction between mind and brain go away by parroting the slogan that "the mind is what the brain does." I am willing to adopt this brand of empty talk long enough to agree that the mind is entirely dependent on the brain, and once the brain is unplugged, the mind is gone too. As the Darwinian fundamentalists and neurobiologists are now fond of saying, the brain is indeed analogous to your computer's hardware and the mind is like a software program that it runs; but the practical gap between the two is as great as the gap between the electronic circuitry of my motherboard and the meaning of the sentence that I am now typing on my word processor. Trying to find evil in the neurons is like trying to find this sentence by taking the computer apart and examining the wiring.

Insofar as the neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers have bonded around the belief that humans are stimulus-response machines – merely more complicated – that are run by algorithms that respond to incoming data in neurologically stereotyped ways, these savants are only irritating distractions; but

because their silliness has become mainstream and influential, they cannot be ignored. However this moment of cultural madness ultimately plays out, their fatuous scientism may well have alarming consequences in the meantime.

For instance, the anxiety of some of them, and of the chowderheads who believe them, that the effect of neuroscience will be to give the criminals a pass on legal responsibility, is balderdash and hardly worth noting. Neuroscientists, evolutionary psychologists, and experimental philosophers, like the rest of us, do not wish to be murdered and dismembered. It is immaterial to them, as to everyone else, whether the perpetrator is morally blameworthy for his crimes or not. With their approval, we will still quarantine the bad actors, for the simple reason that they endanger us; and until we overcome our vengefulness, which does not appear to be likely to happen any time soon, we will also continue to torment them in our prisons with sadistic relish.

But that is not to say that the scientific fantasy is guaranteed to be harmless. The danger today leans the other way – not that the legal authorities, bamboozled by the liberal bleeding hearts among the neuro-boys, will let the violent offenders go, giving as a new version of the abuse excuse that "he was a victim of his neurons," but that they will use brain scans to make preemptive arrests of people who have committed no offense whatsoever. That this is more than just a dystopian fantasy is indicated by numerous news articles. On March 7, 2016, the science editor of *The Telegraph*, Sarah Knapton, reported that the "root of all evil" has been "discovered by scientists."

"Our study pinpoints the brain circuits essential to the aggressive motivations that build up as animals prepare to attack," says study senior

investigator Dr Dayu Lin, an assistant professor at the Neuroscience Institute at NYU Langone.

The part of the brain which switches on before aggressive behavior is anatomically known as the ventrolateral part of the ventromedial hypothalamus, or VMHvl . . . .

The brain doctors are imagining a rosy future for this technology:

Researchers say that the finding could lead to drugs which would help people control violent behavior, without the need for restraints or sedation. It might even be possible to continually monitor brain activity and alert health experts or the security services before an aggressive attack . . . ." Our results argue that the ventrolateral part of the ventromedial hypothalamus should be studied further as part of future efforts seeking to correct behaviors from bullying to sexual predation," Dr. Lin added.

For the current study, male mice were trained to attack weaker male mice . . . .

Perhaps at this point, with the mention of trained mice, the "scientists" and the pop science editors who channel them have descended far enough into self-parody for us to laugh heartily at them, albeit not without a shudder or two at the possibility, however remote, that the paternalistic state will eventually get around to taking these nostrums seriously and arresting people *before* they have broken any laws.

The reader with a grasp of Logic might note the elementary fallacy involved in the "reasoning" of these researchers. It may prove out that *if* aggressive violence occurs, *then* the VMHvl will always be found to be switched on. It does not follow that if the VMHvl is switched on, then aggressive violence will always occur. Put in the terms of a philosophy classroom, "If A, then B" does not support the validity of "If B, then A." Put in the terms of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution – the search and seizure of your person and property, including your brain scan, without probable cause

– without your having yet *done* something – is a violation of the most elementary of human rights.

Predictably following a law of physics, such a notable vacuity will engender an equal and opposite vacuity, so the very next day *The Telegraph* featured a vigorous riposte by Brian Masters, a British writer who specializes in the biographies of serial killers.

The subject of one such book, Dennis Nilsen, would shave and dress the corpses and then talk to them. After days or weeks of this, he dismembered them. The title of Masters's article pithily encapsulates the gist of his repudiation of the mouse-manipulating doctors: "Science will never show us the root of all evil."

This is certainly the view of the hoi polloi. Masters hardly bothers to be any more articulate about it than the lads at the pub:

The man who behaves violently does so because he wants to. He has the will to decide and to act upon that decision. The hypothalamus area of his brain may trigger an impulse, but he retains the right either to obey that trigger or to deny its power.

Unfortunately for the cogency of his case, such as it is, each of these three sentences contradicts the other two. Yes, people behave violently because they want to. The evildoer is putting in good minutes – he is exhilarated by the violence. But it does not follow from this that he had "the will to decide and to act upon that decision." That is an altogether separate question, and his wanting to do it and getting pleasure from it is not evidence one way or the other. When asked if he felt any remorse, Nilsen said, "I wished I could stop, but I couldn't. I had no other thrill or happiness." He is admitting

that he wanted to do it and liked doing it; but he is also saying that he could not refrain from doing it even though he knew it was wrong – could not, through an exercise of will, decide otherwise. The third sentence is correct in making a distinction between the triggering of an impulse and obedience to it, but still leaves unaddressed the question of whether the obedience to the impulse feels – *feels* – voluntarily chosen or compelled; and it is a strange locution to say that an individual retains *the right* to obey or not obey an impulse. Are we suddenly discussing constitutional law here? I thought we were looking at *psychology*.

A statement like the subheading of the article – "No matter what the biological influences, we still have the freedom to choose right or wrong" – is a nullity. I suppose theoretically all of us have the freedom to choose all of the time, although for most of us most of the time, that freedom is *purely* theoretical. (Ask yourself if you are free to kiss off your job.) But let's agree to own this putative freedom, if only because it affords us so much satisfaction when we saddle other people with it and allocate blame: we still haven't shed any light on *why* some people exercise their freedom to save the whales and others to kill their entire families – or as many strangers as they can in as short a time as possible.

Thus we are offered competing vacuities by our two articles: my ventromedial hypothalamus made me do it; no, nothing *made* me do it, but I *chose evil*, end of story. Both views suffer, strangely, from the same inattention to causality. The scientific position sounds philosophically deterministic, but does not trace causation back any further than the activation of the ventromedial hypothalamus just prior to the criminal act. The neuroscientist is markedly incurious about whatever external events might

have preceded the lighting up of that portion of the brain. Were the neurons that fired activated by an argument with another person a minute before the violent act? Is the personal history of the perpetrator, stretching back decades into his childhood, at all pertinent? The neuro-nerds do not know and do not care. (Well, in the case of the experimental mouse, they know that an electrical stimulation was directly applied to the VMHvl of the miscreant.) The moralistic view *also* rules out any attention to antecedent occurrences, this time on principle: an act is chosen with eyes wide open and the investigation ends with the description of the act. But surely the act is chosen for a *reason*? To the proponent of free will, the "reason" is just an excuse. The Christian moralist may accept the reality of a diabolic personage or force, whose blandishments operated upon the perpetrator; but even this Satanic power is still not strong enough to serve as an alibi – the perpetrator in the grip of a demon *still* has the "right" and the willpower to say no. (On what evidence? Well, never mind.)

The second view sounds sillier than the first, at least to most educated people, because we are increasingly secular and scientific in our intellectual pretensions. We empiricists don't believe in Satan. But if the first account seems more genuinely scientific, think again: the two views are compatible. The "scientist" identifies the cause of the behavior as sudden electrical activity in the ventromedial hypothalamus; the "ethicist" (or whatever the self-styled avatar of so-called common sense calls himself) identifies the cause as a temptation to which the perpetrator succumbs. But the temptation is simply the translation of the electrical activity into a subjective experience. The neurons fire away; the individual feels an impulse that he could resist but does not. The two interpretations are correlates of each other. That there is an identifiable part

of the brain that is labeled the ventromedial hypothalamus, but no identifiable part of the brain that is labeled free will, is not a difference-maker – our advocate of moral choice would not be averse to locating the neuronal substrate of free will in the VMHvl. Even a fundamentalist zany would be glad to admit that possession by the devil should show up in the readout of a brain scan.

What unites our two experts is their each cutting off the investigation after tracing the antecedents of the catastrophe back a full five or ten seconds to an alleged origin when the perpetrator pictured the act to himself just before committing it – as a consequence either of the firing of neurons or of a "choice," which on either scenario occurred *just before the finger squeezed the trigger*. I am suggesting modestly that both might want to continue backtracking a little further – considering, perhaps, the events of the previous few days or months in the life of the offender, or the events of his entire life beginning at birth, or the cultural evolution of our species over the last 10,000 years. It might also behoove the researchers to examine how cultural differences feed into divergent societal values and to note some of the startling variances in legal codes and principles of jurisprudence. A "crime of passion," in some jurisdictions around the globe, will garner a light sentence or even an acquittal. Perpetration of an "honor killing" may not even subject the murderer to the inconvenience of an arrest.

I'm not averse to taking up hominid biological evolution of the past four million years or mammalian evolution of the past 200 million years, but they will illuminate the topic mostly by negation: the record will show that evil is not present in the primate record or the mammalian record in any meaningful way. Evil, therefore, must be looked

for as a phenomenon afflicting only *Homo sapiens*, and only in very recent times. This fact alone makes nonsense of both strict neurological determinism and theologically rigorous free will. If almost no one committed these kinds of acts prior to the great leap forward in human cultural evolution that began with farming and living in settlements, then we have to assign some of the blame to brand new factors in human evolution. It can't be neurology alone, since the brain cannot have changed that drastically in that short a period of time; and it can't be free will alone, since our ancestors had free will for many millennia without committing the kinds of crimes we have seen in the last 6,000 years. There must be other causal factors, and they must have arisen almost within historical memory. Both camps in the modern debate are willfully blind.

