

March 25 2012

Good News: You Are Not Your Brain

By Deepak Chopra, MD, FACP & Dr. Rudolph E. Tanzi, Ph.D., Joseph P. and Rose F. Kennedy, Professor of Neurology, Harvard Medical School Director, Genetics and Aging at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH).

Deepak Chopra and Rudy Tanzi are co-authors of their forthcoming book *Superbrain: New Breakthroughs for Maximizing Health, Happiness and Spiritual Well-Being* by Harmony Books.

Like a personal computer, science needs a Recycle Bin for ideas that didn't work out as planned. In this bin would go commuter trains riding on frictionless rails using superconductivity, along with interferon, the last AIDS vaccine, and most genetic therapies. These failed promises have two things in common: they looked like the wave of the future but then reality proved too complex to fit the simple model that was being offered.

The next thing to go into the Recycle Bin might be the brain. We are living in a golden age of brain research, thanks largely to vast improvements in brain scans. Now that functional MRIs can give snapshots of the brain in real time, researchers can see specific areas of the brain light up, indicating increased activity. On the other hand, dark spots in the brain indicate minimal activity or none at all. Thus we arrive at those familiar maps that compare a normal brain with one that has deviated from the norm. This is obviously a great boon where disease is concerned. Doctors can see precisely where epilepsy or Parkinsonism or a brain tumor has created damage, and with this knowledge new drugs and more precise surgery can target the problem.

But then overreach crept in. We are shown brain scans of repeat felons with pointers to the defective areas of their brains. The same holds for Buddhist monks, only in their case, brain activity is heightened and improved, especially in the prefrontal lobes associated with compassion. By now there is no condition, good or bad, that hasn't been linked to a brain pattern that either "proves" that there is a link between the brain and a certain behavior or exhibits the "cause" of a certain trait. The whole assumption, shared by 99% of neuroscientists, is that we are our brains.

In this scheme, the brain is in charge, having evolved to control certain fixed behaviors. Why do men see other men as rivals for a desirable woman? Why do people seek God? Why does snacking in front of the TV become a habit? We are flooded with articles and books reinforcing

the same assumption: the brain is using you, not the other way around. Yet it's clear that a faulty premise is leading to gross overreach.

The flaws in current reasoning can be summarized with devastating force:

1. Brain activity isn't the same as thinking, feeling, or seeing.
2. No one has remotely shown how molecules acquire the qualities of the mind.
3. It is impossible to construct a theory of the mind based on material objects that somehow became conscious.
4. When the brain lights up, its activity is like a radio lighting up when music is played. It is an obvious fallacy to say that the radio composed the music. What is being viewed is only a physical correlation, not a cause.

It's a massive struggle to get neuroscientists to see these flaws. They are king of the hill right now, and so long as new discoveries are being made every day, a sense of triumph pervades the field. "Of course" we will solve everything from depression to overeating, crime to religious fanaticism, by tinkering with neurons and the kinks thrown into normal, desirable brain activity. But that's like hearing a really bad performance of Rhapsody in Blue and trying to turn it into a good performance by kicking the radio.

We've become excited by a flawless 2008 article published by Donald D. Hoffman, professor of cognitive sciences at the University of California Irvine. It's called ["Conscious Realism and the Mind-Body Problem"](#), and its aim is to show, using logic, philosophy, and neuroscience that we are not our brains. We are "conscious agents," Hoffman's term for minds that shape reality, including the reality of the brain. Hoffman is optimistic that the thorny problem of consciousness can be solved, and science can find a testable model for the mind. But future progress depends on researchers abandoning their current premise, that the brain is the mind. We urge you to read the article in its entirety, but for us, the good news is that Hoffman's ideas show that the tide may be turning.

It is degrading to human potential when the brain uses us instead of vice versa. There is no doubt that we can become trapped by faulty wiring in the brain - this happens in depression, addictions, and phobias, for example. Neural circuits can seemingly take control, and there is much talk of "hard wiring" by which some activity is fixed and preset by nature, such as the fight-or-flight response. But what about people who break bad habits, kick their addictions, or overcome depression? It would be absurd to say that the brain, being stuck in faulty wiring, suddenly and spontaneously fixed the wiring. What actually happens, as anyone knows who

has achieved success in these areas, is that the mind takes control. Mind shapes the brain, and when you make up your mind to do something, you return to the natural state of using your brain instead of the other way around.

It's very good news that you are not your brain, because when mind finds its true power, the result is healing, inspiration, insight, self-awareness, discovery, curiosity, and quantum leaps in personal growth. The brain is totally incapable of such things. After all, if it is a hard-wired machine, there is no room for sudden leaps and renewed inspiration. The machine simply does what it does. A depressed brain can no more heal itself than a car can suddenly decide to fly. Right now the golden age of brain research is brilliantly decoding neural circuitry, and thanks to neuroplasticity, we know that the brain's neural pathways can be changed. The marvels of brain activity grow more astonishing every day. Yet in our astonishment it would be a grave mistake, and a disservice to our humanity, to forget that the real glory of human existence is the mind, not the brain that serves it.

Top comments

Both Brandon & Partly Accurate refuse to acknowledge there is no scientific evidence whatsoever, that irrefutably shows that the brain creates consciousness. Both Brandon & PA will not discuss is the scientific theory that the brain acts as a conduit or receiver of consciousness, much like a radio receives radio waves and then produces the sounds we here on the radio, or a television set receives a broadcast and then displays a TV Show. Neither the radio or the television produce the signals received. Brandon & PA therefore fall into the well known logical fallacy of arguing that the brain is the product of consciousness - without any actual evidence to support their premise. Their argument is the same as arguing a RADIO is the source of the signals it receives, or a Television is the source of the Television show you watch. We all know this is false. Brandon & PA will then argue that when you alter the radio, or the TV - remove certain components etc. as you might do in the brain - you will see parts of the TV show disappear or have a different color - they then argue this proves that the TV itself is the source of the TV show. In truth, there is a growing amount of evidence that shows that consciousness is not dependent entirely on brain processes. The accumulation of Near Death research by scientists such as Sabom or Carter, the great scientific work on the unconscious by Frederic Myers and his good friend William James, studies by Professor Rhine & his wife, more fairly recent work by Ian Stevenson all point to consciousness not being dependent on brain mechanisms. Indeed, recent discoveries in Quantum physics point to a fundamental non-locality to our reality, and a participatory reality - where consciousness itself plays a direct role in the reality we experience - and is not simply a by-product of inert, unfeeling chemicals and chromosomes.