

Just a brain? I think not!

Am I Just My Brain?

Sharon Dirckx

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Dr Sharon Dirckx¹ received her doctorate in brain imaging from Cambridge University and has held research positions at the University of Oxford and the Medical College of Wisconsin. She is Senior Tutor at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and an apologist with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. With *Am I Just My Brain?* Sharon Dirckx's strong Christian faith is in plain view as she colourfully discusses our grey matter in eight chapters, each covering a different question.

Inevitably, one such topic is the existence of the soul and the nature of mind and thought. She also considers the plasticity of the brain, the extent to which it may be reorganised. Transgenderism is briefly covered; the materialistic worldview is actually at odds with claims made by the transgender movement that the physical gender may be wrong, and that one's identity is a matter of choice. Clearly both cannot be correct (p. 38) and biblically speaking it is safe to say that *both* views are wrong. Are we just machines or more than that? What about our subjective conscious experiences (qualia)? Is free will illusory and our (religious) beliefs as human beings merely hard-wired, a function of brain activity?

Using various analogies and anecdotes, Dirckx demonstrates that the materialistic worldview, including the human brain, does not account for the experiences people have. Scientific naturalism cannot explain everything.²

Rather, *Am I Just My Brain?* is a philosophical question (p. 21).

Neural hardware versus software

How the brain really operates is not fully understood. Yes, we know the 'hardware' contains many synapses and neurons (figure 1), but none of these parts actually think. It is baffling how some neuroscientists on one hand can admit that the brain's function is still a mystery, but on the other that it is the whole person. Describing computer hardware (a third person observation) says nothing about any 'software' running on it. Similarly:

"No amount of knowledge of rods, cones, corneas, light transmission, electrical stimulation of the optic nerve and image generation in the brain would get [blind] Mary any closer to the experience of what it is like to actually *see* [emphasis in original]" (p. 47).

The brain's 'software' is very personal—a first person perspective—including qualia and consciousness (p. 45).³ Hardware does not generate software. Just as well, because you are not me, even though our neurons and synapses are made of the same stuff. Therefore, the statement "you are just your brain" is clearly self-refuting if matter is all that is, because that statement itself is not part of matter; rather, it is information. This answers the first of three questions Dirckx lists to test a worldview (pp. 26–27):

1. Is it internally coherent?
2. Does it have explanatory power?
3. Can it be lived?

Does the immaterial play any role?

Atheist Sam Harris, whose Ph.D. is in neuroscience, 'believes' that "Free will is an illusion." Yet, in the same breath, he says:

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"if I were to trade places with one of these men, atom for atom, I would be him... . There is simply no intellectual position from which to deny this. The role of luck, therefore, appears decisive" (p.76).⁴

It is very ironic that such a hard-line determinist should say that luck is decisive; naturally, Harris could not help himself. Interestingly, this irony was missed by a man who received a degree in philosophy from Stanford University and, remarkably, practised meditation for more than 30 years.⁵

Clearly there is more to these things than Harris believes: immaterial things frequently affect the material, and vice versa. Dirckx gives numerous examples:

"Cyber-bullying can cause a child to lose their appetite... . Being asked on a date ... may cause blushing... . Crying ... could be triggered by the news that a loved one has died" (pp. 70–71).

In the case of Phineas Gage (p. 59), a work accident caused a metal rod to shoot through his skull, destroying most of his left frontal lobe. He survived, but his personality changed (that is, according to many psychology textbooks and articles): formerly mild-mannered, his newly acquired profane and inappropriate behaviour resulted in him losing his job. To adherents of the idea that the person (be it his mind,

soul, or character) is in fact the brain, the explanation is simple: Gage's brain was severely damaged, and thus his personage too. But what if he had lost his eyesight, or a limb? Is it possible that his personage likewise might have changed, being unable to see or walk for instance? Surely most people would be heavily affected by such a trauma? What's more, after Gage recovered, the evidence indicates he lived a respectable life. Perhaps the scars of this horrific accident made for awkward stares which made him respond harshly, but such alleged anecdotes are not apparent from his family life or working with animals.⁶

What about the world of medicine? When trialling a new medicine, a control group is given a placebo, to compare the results of those who received the medicine and those who didn't. There are reports of people in the control group recovering, even though they were not administered the active drug. Is this a case of mind over matter? Can it be that people were healed because they truly believed they were treated with an effective medicine, even though they were not? This placebo effect is at odds with a purely materialistic view of the world (p. 50). The same applies to the nocebo effect, the influence of negative expectations on a patient's outcome.⁷

"Human beings straddle the material and immaterial realms", states Prof. Michael Egnor, a paediatric neurosurgeon of Stony Brook University School of Medicine, New York (p. 69).⁸ This is not surprising to people familiar with Scripture. When the Bible speaks about the complete person, it speaks of spirit and soul and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23); only one of these represents the material. The Word of God can divide both the immaterial soul and spirit, as well as the material joints and marrow (Hebrews 4:12).⁹

Is it liveable?

There are people who have taken the material perspective to the extreme. Instead of talking about the experience

of 'butterflies' (or similar) when describing being in love, they talk about endorphins. While this would be technically correct in such a context, it would certainly not bode well in a romantic setting! Unless of course the recipient responds by releasing more endorphins when talking about endorphins.

Dirckx spends quite a bit of time discussing God and his relationship with mankind. God's unconditional love for us is not associated with any hormones or other biological molecules—it's not a fleeting feeling. The ultimate example is, of course, the Creator, who showed "his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Being made in His image, people can extend grace to others too, sometimes referred to as random acts of kindness (RAOK). Dirckx addresses whether free will is an illusion. If it is, the chemicals in our brain must be what determine RAOK, in which case the misnomer RAOK should simply be called 'acts': there is nothing random or kind about laws of nature—they just are.

Similarly, our religious beliefs would then be hard-wired as well. The brain's circuitry, rather than our volition, would 'decide' what we do with Jesus' atonement at the Cross. It would mean that those who believe in the risen Christ cannot do anything

but believe that—they cannot help themselves. Yet, we would also have to acknowledge that those who follow, say, Mohammed or Buddha—or Darwin—are equally wired to do so (p. 95).¹⁰

All in all, the purely materialistic view of the brain would make the genetic fallacy (judging something by tracing it to its source) redundant. Whether something is good or bad becomes meaningless, because such a qualification has no intrinsic, material basis; it is merely an artefact of synaptic firings. Morality doesn't really exist in an atheistic worldview.

Closing comments

This slim volume covers a topic that many people may find interesting, whilst at the same time making a case for the existence of God:

"Brain activity, far from being a threat to God, is exactly what we would predict. ... If there were no brain activity during prayer, this would give more cause for concern!" (p. 113).

References

1. Pronounced Dirix.
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4. Harris, S., *Free Will*, Free Press, New York, 2012, pp. 4–5.
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6. O'Leary, D., Phineas Gage: The evolution of the lecture room psychopath, mindfulhack.blogspot.com, 25 Mar 2009.
7. Robson, D., The contagious thought that could kill you, bbc.com/future/article/20150210-can-you-think-yourself-to-death, 11 Feb 2015.
8. Egnor, M., A map of the soul, firstthings.com, 29 Jun 2017.
9. The bipartite/tripartite discussion is not part of the scope of this book. Suffice to say that there is both a material as well as an immaterial aspect to human beings. For further information, see: Sarfati, J., *The Genesis Account: A theological, historical, and scientific commentary on Genesis 1–11*, pp. 302–309, Creation Book Publishers, Powder Springs, GA, 2015.
10. Of course the word 'equally' is misplaced, because clearly these are very different faiths, not least on the topic of grace.

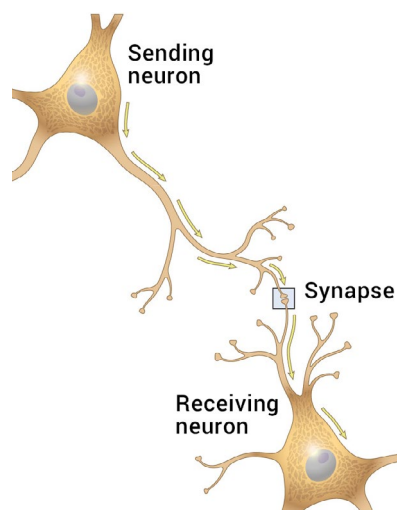


Figure 1. Neurons connect via synapses.