

Aping Mankind – Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity

Raymond Tallis. (2011). Durham: Acumen.

In the perspective of the Analytic of Da-sein, all conventional, objectifying representations of a capsule-like psyche, subject, person, ego, or consciousness in psychology and psychopathology must be abandoned in favor of an entirely different understanding.

(Heidegger, 2001, p4).

Heidegger proposed ‘an entirely different understanding’ that he called Da-sein or being-in-the-world. For existential therapists this is a given. We cannot understand our clients by viewing them as psyches, or indeed brains, divorced from the context of their worlds. Increasingly, the profession of psychotherapy is following cultural trends towards classification and medicalisation of human problems in living, trends which encourage objectification and are in conflict with the philosophy of Heidegger. There is a shortage of modern writers who are able to think outside of these cultural trends and, speaking for myself, I find that for inspiration I turn to philosophers of former times rather than modern authors – with a few notable exceptions such as the work of Thomas Szasz. Here is another of those exceptions:

In the work of Raymond Tallis, neuroscientist and philosopher, may be found an unconventional and unfashionable but philosophically rigorous view of the world of neuroscience that is congruent with the early work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. I strongly recommend this work to existential therapists and indeed to anyone who has ever asked the question, ‘What it is to be human?’

In this book, Tallis sets out to clear away the modern myths that neuroscience and Darwin’s theory of evolution can fully explain what it is to be human. It may seem obvious that we are not our brains, and that there is a vast gulf between ourselves and any species of animal, and that no matter how much we might learn scientifically about the brain or the behaviour of animals, this information is not going to fully explain human consciousness in all its complexity. One might even call this a no-brainer. This does not stop some neuroscientists and many eminent thinkers from indulging in exaggerated claims for both neuroscience and Darwin’s theory of evolution. Even when the scientists themselves make no such claims, they are made for them by the media and individuals uninformed about either neuroscience or evolutionary theory. Neuroscience has become so fashionable that it is hard to read an article or attend a lecture on any subject at all without the writer or speaker drawing upon so-called neuroscience to back up and

market his or her own ideas. Tallis refers to this as Neuromania. A parallel tendency to misapply Darwin's theory of evolution to all aspects of human societal living Tallis names Darwinitis.

If it is all so obvious, why read the book? The trouble is that the ramifications of misapplying neuroscience and Darwinism are so extensive in our society that it is difficult to hold onto these simple facts: mind does not equate to brain and we are not solely animals. Tallis elucidates clearly how dangerous losing sight of these facts can be.

In the first two chapters, Tallis sets out the views that he intends to challenge and in the following chapters he demonstrates why they are wrong. He starts with first principles: what is neuroscience and what can it tell us? Tallis outlines the historical development of the study of the brain, beginning with the Ancient Greeks, and describes the current theories of neuroscience, based on recent advances in research. Tallis recognises the tremendous benefits to humanity arising from neuroscience, but also draws attention to the limitations of studies of the brain: 'The apparent fact that the same brain areas are activated when we listen to pleasurable music and during sex confirms how uninformative imaging is.' (p. 283) Tallis proceeds to give a thorough and extensive analysis of why neuroscience and the theory of evolution cannot fully explain what it is to be human, and how disastrous and impoverishing is the influence of Neuromania and Darwinitis on our lives.

It is a bitter irony that two of our greatest intellectual achievements – the theory of evolution and neuroscience – should be used to prop up a picture of humanity that is not only wrong but degrading. I feel the misuse of bioscience all the more acutely since I have been a biologist of sorts all my life – a doctor and clinical scientist – and my research has been in the field of neuroscience, where I have seen huge advances that have amazed and inspired me. The biologicistic image of humans effectively denies the centrality, even the possibility, of precisely those unique capacities that have made humans able to theorize about evolution or to develop neuroscience.

(p 12).

Tallis' writes eloquently and argues brilliantly. And yet Tallis's arguments are not mainstream and go against the current zeitgeist. Why do so many other brilliant writers get it so very wrong? Using his own professional knowledge as a neuroscientist and philosopher, Tallis explains how many experts fall into the error of believing that they are explaining humanity when they are simply examining a material object, the brain, or studying animals. 'Our way of self-conscious being-together is utterly

different from the essentially solitary lives of even the most social animals. As the primatologist Jane Goodall wrote, non-human primates are “trapped within themselves” (p12).

As Tallis explains, although the brain is a necessary condition for human consciousness, it is not sufficient on its own.

The truth is, no theory of matter will explain why material entities (e.g. human beings) are conscious and others are not. The phenomena described in physics are present equally in conscious and unconscious beings; indeed, they are universally distributed through the material world. So they provide no account of the difference between, say, a thought and a pebble, which is the kind of difference that any theory of consciousness worthy of the name must be able to capture.

(p119)

If all mental states are physical states governed by the laws of physics, then there is no free will and therefore no responsibility for individual actions. Tallis describes the research experiments that have been conducted (experimentation ‘which treats individuals as passive respondents to stimuli and then discovers that they are passive respondents to stimuli’ (p79)) that supposedly prove that there is no free will, and he demonstrates that the interpretations of these findings are seriously flawed. ‘The discovery that some actions are not as freely chosen as we may have thought does not take us to the conclusion that no action is freely chosen’. (p245)

One criticism of the book might be that some of the chapters, although beautifully written, are quite densely worded. Some of his arguments are therefore hard to follow, but as Tallis says in his introduction: ‘Because this is an area in which the sloppy thinkers have carried the day, there will be no compromise on rigour.’ (p10). There is no compromise, and although sometimes difficult, Tallis is always worth the effort. I learnt a lot through reading this book.

There is only one statement that I think falls below his usual standards of rigour. It appears in the discussion of the use of neuroscience in legal pleas of diminished responsibility due to impairment of mental function, where he writes:

It is perfectly obvious that, if someone is hearing voices that tell them that unless they kill a particular individual God will punish them forever for disobedience, or a massacre will not be averted, they cannot be held responsible for the murder they have committed. The perpetrator is the victim of a brain illness and is more appropriately treated as a patient requiring medical care

rather than as a criminal deserving of punishment.

(p307).

Surely this is not obvious. If a person is instructed to murder, this does not mean he or she bears no responsibility for killing. Although threats in the event of non-compliance with instructions might be mitigating circumstances, does this negate responsibility for the act? While it is clear that people with automatisms associated with epilepsy or brain injuries have diminished responsibility, it is not obvious, at least to me, that someone who says that he or she hears voices is suffering from a brain illness requiring medical care and cannot be held responsible for his or her actions.

Despite my misgivings about this section, the rest of the book is a model of clarity; also brilliant, erudite and often funny. Tallis will be presenting and discussing the argument of this book in detail, with special reference to psychotherapy, when he conducts an all-day Inner Circle Seminar on Sunday 2 December 2012. If he is as engaging a speaker as he is a writer it will be well worth going to. I would like to finish with an excerpt illustrating the dangers of Neuromania:

You and I know, for example, that if a child is treated badly, it may grow up to lead a catastrophically unsatisfactory adult life. The worse the child is treated, and the earlier the ill treatment begins, the greater the likelihood of such an outcome. This, of course, is what we might expect: our picture of the world, and consequently how we engage with it, will be more profoundly affected by early events when none of the basic elements of that world picture is yet in place. Early experiences have less preceding experience to put them into any kind of context. This common-sense observation is not enough for those who want to wear the mantle of science: neurosociologists are increasingly speaking of delinquent behaviour as being “hard-wired” by early experience. This is not only pseudo-science, but wrong in another respect: it turns a probability into a certainty.

(p278).

References

Heidegger, M. 2001. *Zollikon Seminars*. Trans. Mayr, F. & Askay, R. United States of America: Northwestern University Press.
<http://anthonystadlen.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/raymond-tallis-conducts-intellectual.html>.

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