

Bio-determinism

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Since time immemorial, adults are responsible for their own actions. Both our legal system, and our own judgments are based on this. For example, it brings us into turmoil if someone violates the traffic rules. However, neuropsychological research shows that people often base their decisions on other aspects than they think they do. For example, soccer goalkeepers decide in which direction they will dive on the basis of information from the penalty taker's gaze and movement behaviour (position of the non-kicking leg and viewing direction). However, they're convinced that they base their dive on continuously monitoring the ball, which is impossible; the time to process the image of the ball and base the motor output on that, is simply too short.

Bio-determinists argue that human freedom is strongly determined by biological structures, especially the brain. Popular scientific titles go to show: "We are our brain", "Free will does not exist". If a traffic fader is overtaking on the wrong side of the motorway, activity in the caudate nucleus preludes the moment we feel angry. However, the fact that we do not always know on which aspects we base our choices does not mean that we have no will to choose at all. A keeper can also do nothing, or always jump to the same side, etc. In fact, this is not an argument that there is no free will. Bio-deterministic reasoning is not only naive, but certainly potentially dangerous. Why?

It tempts people to "uplift" someone who shows deviant behaviour from second to third person, into someone we can talk about (instead of with). In fact, this is what "classical" psychiatry has been doing for centuries. Of course some people are not accountable, for example due to severe intellectual disability. Even children are not yet fully responsible for their actions. But if someone is sad for a long time and doesn't want to live, a psychiatrist will come up with a "cause" (diagnosis, depression, for example), making the doctor responsible for the condition/treatment, and all thinkable consequences (even euthanasia, if the treatment doesn't work). This way of thinking - deviant emotion or behaviour is an indication of a disease which can be treated - can be applied to any thinkable disorder. But - even more dangerous - also to any religious, political, and artistic expression or belief that we do not understand. It must be in the brain, is there a doctor in the room?

Many futurologists present the future as an unequivocal road in one direction: towards a technological salvation in which man is supported and relieved as much as possible by smart technology. Salvation shines on the horizon, like the gold at the end of the rainbow. But technology both dictates and globalizes, making people more alike. Anyone looking for a different way is at risk of becoming a third person, someone who isn't talked with but talked about. Biological determinism rears its head: something in the brain must be responsible. Again, is there a doctor in the room?

Why are some facts told so little? We are not on the way to a technological sanctuary. To be human, people do not necessarily need smart technology. Development is not unambiguous from bad to better. Afterwards, many "good" solutions turn out to have substantial dark sides, which of course were not visible in advance. People have a free will. Therefore we're responsible for our own actions and choices. Exceptions are very rare.

Again, although we choose on the basis of other things than we think, it remains our choices. Imagine letting go of the principle of our own responsibility, which underlies our legal system. We would certainly end up in a horrendous dystopia.

Our brain is important. A car does not drive without a motor, but the purpose of the journey is not anchored in the engine. As long as we are judged on what we do or don't do in the world, running away on time in a conflict, for example, we are not our brain, and we will have to continue to do it with our free will. We are the essence of our own lives, and cannot outsource that, neither to technology, nor to bio-determinists.