

## THE MYTH OF THE CREATOR-BRAIN. BODY, BEHAVIOR AND CULTURE

Marino Pérez Álvarez

Madrid: Alianza editorial, 2011

**Eduardo García Fernández**

*Clinical Psychologist*

**T**his book proves to be a good antidote and refutation when confronted with the powerful brain-centered trend that has invaded not only psychology, but also fields such as the social sciences, the humanities and even popular culture. At present, the brain has become the neuralgic centre in the explanation of all human matters, going so far as to sustain that everything depends on the brain and even that we are only a "bundle of neurons" just as Francis Crick said in 1994 (*The scientific search for the soul*) on presenting the hypothesis, revolutionary for the 21st century, according to which "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules".

The present essay does not rebuke neuroscience itself, but rather the philosophy it implies, or at least, a certain use of it consistent with physical reductionism according to which everything could be reduced to physical-chemical processes.

If nowadays the brain is becoming a trend, myth or ideology as sustained in the *Myth of the Creator-brain*, what is happening? the author asks himself in the prologue. The answer is brain-centrism; the tendency to explain human activities as if they were a product of the brain blurs everything, and this implies that the role of behavior and culture in the shaping of humans, and even in the configuration of the brain itself, is neglected.

The thesis being defended is that the brain is not the cause, but rather the effect of behaviors as well as of cultural systems. Thus, behavior and culture are just as real and material as the brain, for which the actual person, as the main figure in human affairs, is claimed and recovered. At the same time, in the case of psychotherapy this implies

that the objective is to change people's ways of life and not their brain circuits. The brain is isolated neither from habits nor ways or systems of life; therefore, more than "listening to the drug" it would be better to listen to what the person has to say about what is happening to him/her. This is extremely important in order to understand the status of psychological disorders given that it is increasingly clearer that these are related to living conditions in current society, however, there is a tendency to see them as if they were part of the brain, and there is even the risk that psychology professionals themselves, believing it to be more scientific, would pass psychology concepts and topics through neuroimaging machines; thus, for example, selective attention, short-term and long-term memory, declarative memory, the conceptual system, etc. are re-elaborated in neuroscientific terms with the danger that this entails given that what is really a competence of psychology is the understanding of psychological functioning, and not what is happening in the brain. Psychology studies behavior and not where the brain is functioning. Hence, as Mike Page sustains (cited in the book under review), after a great investment in time and money, neuroscientific findings do not represent a real advancement in psychological knowledge. Psychopathological phenomena - Marino Pérez sustains - are complex human conditions that require the consideration of multiple aspects, among these the neurobiological, but it cannot be reduced to these. However, the image conveyed is that psychopathology is reduced to neurochemical unbalances and defective circuits.

This image is practically upheld by neuroimages that consist of colored points in the brain, as if the disorders were there and that was what they really were. The truth is - the author continues arguing - that neuroimages are offered with the presumptuousness that they show the reality of the disorders, as if subjective experience and other psychological aspects were not taken into account when in reality these are the aspects that truly qualify the

---

*Correspondence:* Eduardo García Fernández. C/ Posada Herrera, 6-3ªA. 33002-Oviedo. España. E-mail: [edgarsir@gmail.com](mailto:edgarsir@gmail.com)



disorder and not precisely the bright images, with the risk that current and future psychologists may be seduced by the magnetism of the images and not even psychologists themselves are capable of understanding what is really happening to the person. In sum, more attention is paid to a few colored points - as technology indicates - than really listening to what is happening to the person.

Chapter two entitled "Philosophy of the brain: neither dualism, nor monism, philosophical materialism" is interesting as in it the underlying philosophical question is raised, which is in the basis of brain-centrism; the alternative to a philosophical monism, or dualism is philosophical materialism which distinguishes three genera of materiality: physical reality, psychological reality, and abstract, cultural objective realities. Thus, brain, behavior and culture become three irreducible yet, at the same time, mutually integrated realities.

In chapter three the brain is put in its place, so to speak, not on a pedestal for its achievements to be admired as if it were a magic organ, but rather incorporated into the body itself and scaffolded in culture. Here is where it is posited that when talking about brain functions we can never lose sight of or take as evident the cultural scaffolding surrounding it, including both the presence and the preexistence of others and social institutions, as well as language, educational guidelines, etc. The brain is incorporated into the body and this, at the same time, is embedded in a cultural medium from which it depends inexorably as well as inextricably. The example he uses is that it would be enough for a moment if certain cultural systems (scaffolding) failed such as clocks, spatial coordinates or navigation devices, not to mention language so that the brain would "go crazy" as seems to happen in dreams, when the world is, strictly speaking, suspended. Therefore, the human brain is the most powerful amongst all animal species, but also the weakest if it lacks social influences (cultural scaffolding, social institutions).

In the following chapter, "From the poiesis of the soul to brain plasticity", it is argued that the Aristotelic soul is a sculpture of itself through habits and customs, highlighting

brain plasticity, and here both William James who introduced the term plasticity in the current neuroscience sense in his work *Psychology Principles* in 1890 linking plasticity to behavioral habits and Cajal who used the term "plasticity" in 1894 independently of W. James, are cited. It was Cajal who maintained that it is the activity of the person him/herself (as a whole) that enables him/her to be the sculptor of his/her own brain. A phrase that already includes the fact that it is the person as a functional organism, who forms, carves or sculpts the brain through habits, customs and cultural practices.

In this last part of the book plasticity is mentioned as an argument against brain-centrism given that the brain is more malleable than creator. Multiple examples of research on plasticity are used: canaries, musicians, taxi drivers, or anyone who can read. Writing is a magnificent example of "developmental ratchet" which prevents us from going backwards, not because it is embedded in the brain but rather because it is institutionalized, already being a part of the environment in which people's lives take place.

Therefore, we can conclude that more than turning to neuroscientific reductionisms, it would be necessary, as an antidote to the poison of the ideological use of the brain at the service of economic liberalism, to exonerate all humanistic tradition (literature, history, philosophy, scientific knowledge), which seems to be relegated or in second row, from the excessive peak of neuroscience. The aim of this essay is to put neuroscience in its place without detracting from its contributions but keeping in mind that the brain has changed very little, although human matters have greatly changed and in function of this assumption the old humanism, the tradition of long-term wisdom, which is reflected in writing, and, by the way, not in neuroimages, tells us much more about man and his problems. So, curiously, it is necessary to turn to the ancient torch to guide us in knowing man and, however, turn to cathodic lights if we want to know post-humans. Nietzsche already said this in *The Twilight of the Idols* back in 1888: "a psychologist must turn his eyes from himself to see anything at all".

