



The Human Person and the Human Brain

Conference and workshop 29.08.2018 – 04.09.2018

The central organ of the human nervous system, the brain, is sometimes said to be the most complex object in the known universe. Recent years have seen remarkable advances in our understanding of its structure and workings, advances which have led many to endorse more materialistic or mechanistic understandings of ourselves – understandings which aspire to reflect on the human level the deterministic picture of a causally closed universe governed by immutable laws, and representable in mathematical equations. Brain imaging techniques, which enable us to allocate mental functions to precise cortical areas, and in some cases to establish the neural pathways through which information is processed, have created doubt about the reality of human freedom, prompted revised descriptions of reason and its place in decision making, and cast suspicion on the validity of established distinctions of kind, which separated person from animal, animal from machine, and free agent from conditioned organism. Moreover, with the development of neuroscience, increasing pressure is being put on traditional ways of managing our lives and relationships with others – the ways we make moral judgements, engage in legal process and impart virtue – and alternatives which are expected to achieve the desired results more reliably and efficiently are being proposed. These include neuroscience-inspired approaches to disciplines like economics, law, or aesthetics, as well as different versions of transhumanism.

These developments stand in a complex relation both with the traditional concept of the person, a central concern of philosophy and theology since at least the early Middle Ages, and with the contemporary philosophical arguments concerning the nature of consciousness and other mental phenomena. Our legal systems, personal relationships, and everyday encounters with others are often thought to be predicated on understanding the human being as a person, who responds to reasons, makes decisions, and whose life forms a continuous narrative in which individual identity is maintained from moment to moment and from year to year. At the same

time a growing number of contemporary philosophers see consciousness as an irreducible and fundamental aspect of reality, and argue that subjective experience cannot be cashed out by appeal to any physical properties of the world. Are these strands of thought reconcilable with contemporary neuroscience? Are we justified in treating the traditional attributes of persons, such as self-identity, moral worth, appreciation of beauty, free will, or consciousness itself simply as concepts of 'folk psychology' to be revised by empirical research, or can the developments in the empirical sciences, and in particular in neuroscience, be interpreted as part of a philosophical framework which does not see these attributes in a reductionist way? Are there any fundamental implications that the modern science of the brain may have on our understanding of moral judgement, the law, religion, and art as things traditionally seen as engaged in by persons, and a manifestation of their moral lives?

The purpose of the conference and workshop is to discuss and debate these issues from a variety of perspectives, to examine the relevance of neuroscience to philosophy and other humanities, and to confront the issues that surround the emergence of this new form of reductionism and its relationship to the most recent work on the metaphysics of consciousness and experience.

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