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The brain is what we do with it

Review of Malabou, Catherine, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* transl. from French by Sebastian Rand, New York: Fordham University Press 2008.

“Why do we persist in our belief that the brain is purely and simply a “machine”, a program without promise? Why are we ignorant of our own plasticity?” asks Catherine Malabou in her book *What Should We Do with our Brain?* (Fordham UP, 2008, p. 9). In it, the French philosopher undertakes nothing less than to articulate a “consciousness of the plastic brain” – trying to open up a fresh perspective on the potentials of the developing, transformative, enabling nature of our central nervous system and thereby attempting to supersede the pervasive, thought-numbing talk of rigid mechanisms and neural determination that still dominates much of the discourses in and around today’s neurosciences. Malabou’s central claim is refreshingly simple: Current research in neuroscience increasingly reveals that the human brain is plastic and malleable in ways previously unthought-of. In effect, this insight reverses the signature claim of the champions of cerebral subjectivity, transforming the merciless “You are your brain!” into the encouraging, empowering “Your brain will become what you are!” It puts the person back in charge – both of their lives and of their nervous system’s organisation. However, this message has, so far, largely failed to reach an audience, both in science or academia, and in the wider public. “Humans make their own brain, but they do not know it” (p. 2). There is yet no consciousness of the brain’s plasticity and thus no awareness of the potentials for development, reorganization. ‘Neuronal man’ has yet to gain a sense of his own freedom.

In times where much of philosophy is lacking both a critical spirit and an energising vision, Malabou’s book is a much-needed manifesto coming at the right time. However, in the end it is little more than a manifesto – it is no worked-out study, it does not present much of an argument. Still, this might be what this branch of philosophy is in urgent need of. How

long have we waited for sentences like this one: “Even if it is fascinating to observe aplysias, we cannot spend our time in ecstasies over slugs.” (p. 67)? Malabou dares to articulate powerfully an inchoate feeling that many share, but few have so far given sufficient expression: the sense that, despite all the exciting advances and insights into the functioning of the brain, the predominant narratives that are routinely spun, the stories that are being told about neuronal organization are remarkable lacking in spirit, creativity, possibility. Instead, what we are presented with, over and over again, are variations of the same sad tales of rigidity and determination, of stable traits and hard-wired routines, of dumb mechanisms programmed in stone age by the unrelenting imperatives of natural selection. This virus has infected philosophy, as expressed in the lingering-on of the lame spirit and boring habitus of 19th century materialism and early 20th century scientism, superficially ‘fancied up’ with borrowings from modern technoscience with its futuristic machinery and colourful images of “the mind at work”. In short, we live in an academic environment hostile to creative thought, hostile to the new – a world in which it is clear that god *and Nietzsche* are dead.

Were it only for the boredom of the predominant narratives, we could probably still live with the situation. But according to Malabou, there is more at stake. The lack of a well-articulated consciousness of the plastic brain creates a vacuum that opens the door to ideological infiltration. If you don’t come up with your own narratives and ideas to take charge of your life, others will happily provide ideas and stories for you. In our day, the chief providers of ready-to-use narratives for all areas of human existence are the spin-doctors in personnel departments and counselling companies of corporate capitalism. We witness the rise of a new spirit of capitalism, the soft but unrelenting pressures of globalised economy, the universal demand for adaptability, flexibility, emotional intelligence, creativity, self-motivation, and other ‘new values’ that will further entangle work and life, that will facilitate the near-complete absorption of existence into the corporate culture of the work world. This, then, is the crucial question for Malabou, the leading thread running through her short book:

Does brain plasticity, taken as a model, allow us to think a multiplicity of interactions in which the participants exercise transformative effects on one another through the demands of recognition, of non-domination, and of liberty? Or must we claim, on the contrary, that, between determinism and polyvalence, brain plasticity constitutes the biological justification of a type of economic, political, and social organization in which all that matters is the result of action as such: efficacy, adaptability – unfailing flexibility? (p. 31)

The central contrast is the one between plasticity, the watchword of the new brain sciences, and flexibility, the watchword of the new capitalism; and the relation between the two is construed as clear-cut: flexibility is the ugly sibling, the mutated miniature of a hopeful idea – “the ideological avatar of plasticity” (p. 12). If we fail to see and capture the potentials, the realities of the brain’s plasticity, we can rest assured that the open space of possibilities will soon be closed for good by the demands and norms of the new world order: flexibility, functionality, adaptability in the work place, and the ability to constantly relocate and re-connect emotionally – the profile of the ideal employee will be set in stone. “Indeed, what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius” (p. 12). The looming prospect of a ‘hostile takeover’ of the promising idea of plasticity by its miniature flexibility is the organizing principle according to which Malabou arranges her material. In this way, she stylizes today’s neuroscience as facing a crucial choice:

Indeed, without this freeing [of the speech of ‘neuronal man’, J.S.], neuroscientific discourse will have the sole consequence – beyond medical advances – of unwittingly producing criteria, models, and categories for regulating social functioning and increasing daily the legitimation of the demand for flexibility as global norm. To produce consciousness of the brain is not to interrupt the identity of brain and world and their mutual speculative relation; it is just the opposite, to emphasize them and to place scientific discovery at the service of an emancipatory political understanding. (p. 53)

What sort of brain science do we want? Is there such a thing as a critical, even emancipatory way of doing neuroscience? Is this even possible? Unfortunately, this question is not developed to the full. Instead, characteristic passages are those in which Malabou provokes and energizes to help the reader grasp a sense of the futility, the boredom, the dangers that arise when neuroscience – and its “neuro-“philosophical choruses – fail to understand the full potentials and responsibilities that come with their insights. Malabou thus hauls sentences such as the following at the members, friends and sympathizers of the neuroscientific community:

How can we fail to see that the only real view of progress opened by the neurosciences is that of an improvement in the “quality of life” through a better treatment of illness? But we don’t want these half-measures, what Nietzsche would rightly call a logic of sickness, despairing, and suffering. What we are lacking is *life*, which is to say: *resistance*. Resistance is what we want. Resistance to flexibility, to this ideological norm advanced consciously or otherwise by a reductionist discourse that models and naturalizes the neuronal process in order to legitimate a certain social and political functioning. (p. 68)

It is the chief merit of the book that Malabou links, probably for the first time, the sociological and social-philosophical discourse on “the new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2006) with the discourses in neuroscience and naturalistic philosophy of mind. This is largely unexplored territory, although the danger of detracting attention away from social conditions and social pathologies through neuroscience’s methodological individualism and mechanistic determinism has always been clear enough. With the cultural hegemony of the neural and cognitive sciences steadily increasing in Western societies, it is high time to explore these uncanny entanglements and start a debate about these things (for another initial attempt, see Choudhury et al 2009; Slaby 2010).

The strong points of Malabou’s book come at a prize, though. The book is indeed a manifesto and not an analysis, even less a scholarly one. It has its strengths when it energizes,

when it stirs up a spirit and creates a fresh motivation – when it is openly an intellectual call to arms. It does not argue for a worked-out theoretical position and certainly it does not succeed at informing its readers about a developing area of research. The presentation of research in neuroscience on neuronal plasticity is highly selective and not at all up to date, shunning a lot of complexity. It is thus clear that this book will not serve everyone’s tastes. On the other hand, that might exactly be the problem these days: Too many people in the humanities want to serve too many tastes, catering simultaneously the demands of the neoliberal university (“research grants”, “interdisciplinarity!”), the debilitating culture political correctness (“no ad hominem arguments...”), the trend towards careful, piecemeal, local studies instead of large-scale social critique (“better be careful!”), often resulting, on part of scholars in the humanities, in escapes to aestheticised or marginal treatments. Can we re-invigorate ourselves – even enrage us to revive the spirit, the power of intellectual critique? Do we still have the guts to say “no”?

To cancel the fluxes, to lower the self-controlling guard, to accept exploding from time to time: this is what we should do with our brain. It is time to remember that some explosions are not in fact terrorist – explosions of rage, for example. Perhaps we ought to relearn how to enrage ourselves, to explode against a certain culture of docility, of amenity, of the effacement of all conflict even as we live in a state of permanent war. It is not because the struggle has changed form, it is not because it is no longer possible to fight a boss, owner, or father that there is no struggle to wage against exploitation. To ask “what should we do with our brain?” is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting economic, political, and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile. (p. 79)

Despite being rife with this much-needed energizing spirit, the book leaves its readers somewhat dissatisfied in the end. This is because it leaves too much hard work undone, too often remains on the level of mere gesture, is not worked-out enough as a study. Even to

awake a critical spirit, to bundle the forces of opposition, one will have to do some more, harder work, to demonstrate, to argue, to come up with facts. Otherwise, the dissenters will be disorganised, without plan and direction, and moreover those who are the target of the critique can too easily shrug it off as irrelevant. For instance, how to substantiate the claim of an unwitting connection between the values and culture of today's capitalism and the impoverished discourses around the brain's plasticity in the terms of flexibility, adaptability and "decentralised networks"? How to show that it is more than a superficial correspondence in some formulations? In our own project of critically engaging with the current neurosciences (Choudhury et al 2009; www.critical-neuroscience.org) we have learned how hard it can be to follow-through with detailed, fact-based critical analyses of the forces and factors that stabilise today's neurocentric discourses, how complex the academic landscape, how varied the discourses, how complicated the science, how polyvalent the influences, how tricky the philosophy, how diverse and varied the interests, attitudes, orientations, technical expertise and local cultures of the scientists. Sure, it is somewhat of dilemma: How to be *both* explicit and critical enough *and* sufficiently systematic, detailed, argumentative – in one and the same work? Malabou is not yet facing up to this problem. Her little book is in the end no more than a call to arms without much of a battle plan. Rhetorically impressive, timely, much-needed – but not more than a very first step. It is time to follow up and go to work.

Additional References

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