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PERSPECTIVE

Is Neuroscience Blind?

Researchers in England claim they now understand why love is “blind,” that is, why people tend not to see faults in their loved ones. According to British psychiatrist Raj Persaud’s newspaper commentary on the research, the answer is that, for evolutionary reasons, “strong emotional ties to another person . . . affect the brain circuits involved in making social judgments about that person. . . . So love really is blind and there is a biological basis for the blindness.”

Persaud is impressed by the work of researchers Andreas Bartels and Semir Zeki: “This is a profound finding in the history of our attempts to *understand* this most profound and powerful human emotion. It means neuroscience finally *explains* a puzzle that has flummoxed artists from Shakespeare to Sinatra attempting to interpret love, which is why we can’t see the faults in our partners or children which others can clearly perceive. . . .” (Emphasis added.)

A profound finding that explains a puzzle? How could it be, when in fact it is no explanation at all for why people behave a particular way? It’s *reductionism*, not explanation—like “explaining” why houses are built by reference to the physics of hammering nails into wood and other such processes.

Undoubtedly areas of the brain activate and de-activate when we look at our wives or husbands and our children. And at some level it’s interesting to know which parts do which. But having that information is not the same as understanding love; nor does it explain the alleged “puzzle” over why we “can’t see” the faults of our loved ones. Is that generalization even true? Are we really blind to the faults, or do we simply accept them as the price paid for greater perceived benefits? Of course, strong feelings can influence or cloud judgment. But with effort people are capable of achieving a reasonable degree of objectivity. They do it routinely.



Dubious premise aside, it's not the neuroscientific findings that I'm interested in challenging, but the *interpretation* of the findings, which is not a matter of neuroscience at all. Obviously we use our brains when we act or think or feel emotions. And that's the point. *We use* our brains. Our brains don't use us. Of course we don't directly activate or de-activate this or that area of our brains in the same way that we move our limbs. But we *indirectly* do so when we engage in various activities.

When a man thinks of his wife or children, no doubt he causes some areas of his brain to change from their previous state. But the changes do not *explain* what he has done, what he experiences, or why.

Nor do the changes explain why he ignores or fails to notice his loved ones' faults. Yes, the changes *describe* something relevant going on, but that is not the same as an explanation. The words relevant to a real explanation include "intend," "choose," and "value," not "pre-frontal cortex" and "magnetic resonance imaging." That is, the explanations lie in the realms of praxeology (the study of human action qua choice) and biography, *not neurophysiology*. We cannot hope to understand persons (as opposed to bodies) if we bypass the first two disciplines and focus on the last.

This has important ethical and political implications, because the more that neuroscience eclipses praxeology and biography in "explaining" human action, the more that individual liberty and self-responsibility are threatened. Robots don't need these things. Persons do. That's why when it comes to understanding persons, Shakespeare, Ludwig von Mises, C.S. Lewis, and Thomas Szasz are worth a whole slew of neuroscientists.

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Election Day isn't far off—a fitting time for a FEE Timely Classic on "lesser evils" by Leonard Read.

The Federal Reserve is up to its usual monetary mischief. Richard Ebeling tells us how to correct it.

Alleged global warming doesn't only provide a subject for exciting movies; it has people scared about species extinction. Christopher Lingle tells you why you need not worry.

Why do protectionists have it easier than free traders? Arthur Foulkes has an answer, and it's no joke.

In making the case against immigration, some opponents have resorted to downright silly economic arguments. Gardner Goldsmith says they ought to know better.

California's fiscal woes can be summed up in three words: government-employee unions. Steven Greenhut has the gory details.

The United States held steady by one measure, but slipped seven places by another. George Leef reports on the latest international rankings on economic freedom.

The *New York Times* may think that the world is a hungrier place. But, Jim Peron writes, that's not what the numbers show.

Our columnists have done it again: Richard Ebeling compares democracy and freedom. Donald Boudreaux explores what it means to "live by the rules." Stephen Davies takes us back to when pollution filled the streets. Russell Roberts defends an alleged traitor. And John Jennrich, seeing people falling for the claim that we're running out of oil, protests, "It Just Ain't So!"

Our book reviewers chew on volumes about trusting strangers, drugs, excellence, and the Federal Reserve.

—SHELDON RICHMAN