Booknotes

Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? is the title of a comprehensive set of 'Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility' (to refer to the subtitle) by Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown (Oxford, 2007).

Broadly speaking, the answer given in the book to the question in its title is 'No', readers may be interested or even relieved to know. What enables Murphy and Brown to come to this view is in part an extensive examination of what they call 'downward causation' in various spheres, including, of course, that of human behaviour. If there is downward causation there, then, if neurons are at the bottom of the heap, they don't on their own make us do anything. Moreover, on top of the internal feedback systems we humans have, we are embodied and social beings. So we interact with the world and also with our fellows by means of language. All these factors taken together enable us continuously to evaluate and modify our behaviour, and to sample and try out alternatives. We are, in other words, self-reflective in the sense that we can, and should, explore what we are doing, assess it, and think of alternatives, which means that we are not in any objectionable sense determined.

All this is interesting and much of it salutary, particularly as our authors do their best to incorporate insights from those, such as Kim and Dennett, who may on the face of it seem opposed to the position they adopt, which at certain points they characterise as 'physicalism without reduction'. Murphy and Brown more or less assume the untenability of dualism or of any form of Cartesianism, and then attempt to analyse in a non-dualistic way what they take to be the obvious facts of human rationality and responsibility.

We might, though, return to their original question. If they are on the right lines, they certainly show that my *neurons* did not make me do it, and they also show that my neurons did not *make* me do it, and possibly that nothing else did either. What, though, is less clear is what in their view the *me* is. The 'me' is clearly not a soul, nor is it a homunculus. It is, we are told, 'the whole person, in her environment', taking into account a broad range of factors when she (or he) acts. But despite the eloquent descriptions we are given of feedback systems, of our embodiment and of our interaction with the 'external scaffolding' of language and society, it has to be said that the 'me' tends to move in and out of focus. We can see what is not doing the evaluating, but just what is the 'me' and what enables me to transcend

doi:10.1017/S0031819108000673
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819108000673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

what I am (including my feedback systems and my language and social relations, presumably, or there is no real transcendence)? In their introduction, Murphy and Brown speak of two 'respected friends' of theirs, philosophers whom they would like to convince that they have pulled off the trick of physicalism without reductionism. It would interesting to know the verdict of the friends.

Two other friends might serve as the basis of a trivial pursuit question. 'What well-known 20th century philosopher made a major contribution to the work of a Nobel prize-winning novelist?' It would be tempting to pose the same question as 'What well-known 20th century philosopher is depicted as the devil in a major work of a Nobel prize-winning novelist?'; but this is a temptation we should resist, because Thomas Mann denies that he did portray the devil in the form of Theodor Adorno in *Doctor Faustus*. At least, that is what Mann *says* in one of his letters to Adorno, which is to be found in *Theodor W. Adorno and Thomas Mann, Correspondence 1943–55* (Polity Press, 2006).

In these letters we observe high levels of sycophancy on Adorno's part and a degree of Olympian detachment on Mann's (so nothing new there), as they attempt to make their way through exile in the USA, the suicide of Mann's son, the start of the Cold War, the McCarthy era in the USA, and returns to Europe. But the peg on which the whole correspondence hangs is the help Adorno gave Mann over the musical doctrines of Adrian Leverkuhn, the Faustus of Mann's novel. This help is treated by Mann as part of the *montage* technique he frequently adopted in his writing (i.e. significant reliance in his novels on descriptions and incidents lifted from elsewhere). Adorno is reduced to pleading that Mann might 'lay greater emphasis upon my (Adorno's) intellectual and imaginative contribution to Leverkuhn's oeuvre' and somewhat less on the provision of 'purely material information'.

The musical doctrines and much of the motivations for them were, of course, those of Schoenberg, a man known to both correspondents. As we read in the letters, this did not turn out well. Schoenberg was incensed that Mann, relying on Adorno, had used his theories without acknowledgement. Eventually, as readers of current editions of *Doctor Faustus* will know, Mann did append an acknowledgement that the musical technique adopted in the novel is 'in truth the intellectual property of a contemporary composer and theoretician Arnold Schoenberg'. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Schoenberg took umbrage at this form of words: *a contemporary composer* indeed! 'In two or three decades we will see who is the contemporary of whom', Schoenberg fumed, and the row rumbled back and forth more or less publicly until Schoenberg's death in 1951.

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As to philosophical content, Adorno and Mann are, as would be expected, critical of any attempt to return to past artistic forms. Mann laments the possible end of high culture and Adorno seeks some sort of consolatory utopianism in his contacts with the younger people he finds in Europe. It would be interesting to know whether this hope of Adorno's survived the events of 1968 and 1969, when Adorno's own students turned on him when, as they saw it, he tried to stop them applying their teacher's doctrines. On the philosophical significance of Schoenberg and his school, Adorno wrote forbiddingly in a letter from July 1948 of 'this objectively necessary contructive contribution to music', which nonetheless 'threatens to revert to something dark and mythological'. Adorno may not have been Leverkuhn's devil, but it is hard not to see something diabolical in both poles of that judgement.

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