

Hanging together

Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricoeur

What makes us think?

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reviewed by Trevor Curnow

The lengthy subtitle of this book says much about it. «A neuroscientist and a philosopher argue about ethics, human nature and the brain.» Perhaps the word «argue» is the one to hone in on first. The book is presented in dialogue form, and from time to time there is a genuine crackle in the exchanges. However, much of the early book is taken up with the question of whether it is really possible for the two to argue at all. Over and over again the very different outlooks of phenomenology and neurobiology are compared and contrasted with each other. Repeatedly Changeux suggests that neurobiology can inform philosophical discussion, and repeatedly Ricoeur responds by questioning the assumptions underlying the scientific claims. He also challenges the ability of science (at least as it presently exists) to capture fully the subjectivity of human existence and dimensions of meaning attached to it. In return, Changeux is prepared to play the waiting game by insisting that what is not known now may yet be known in the future.

The jousting of the early chapters is, however, carried out against the background of an obvious desire to reach, or at least lay the foundations for, a joint understanding. Not surprisingly, perhaps, finding a shared vocabulary frequently proves problematic. Along the way, viewers are treated to some fascinating insights from both participants. Those reading this book from a philosophical background will, I imagine, learn much about the current state of the science of the brain. Despite the occasional moments of friction, it has to be said that Changeux and Ricoeur generally display considerable patience with each other.

Later chapters move on to consider the implications for ethics of their debate. The challenge is summed up by Changeux in this way:

Can we hope one day ... to devise an ethics of universal appeal in a world dominated by cultural, and particularly religious conflicts? Is it possible ... to construct a secular ethics that goes beyond cultural differences and is democratically accepted? (p. 264)

In other words, is a science of ethics possible? Or, to put the issue more contentiously perhaps, if we understood better how and why we think the way we do, would that help us to think better?

Whereas the discussions of the early chapters were tightly focused and highly detailed, the later ones, while stimulating, are looser and less compelling. Ricoeur finds it difficult not to invoke religion, and Changeux tends to stray beyond his original brief. When this happens, much of the earlier incisiveness is lost, although that does not mean that the two are not worth listening to. A curious point of convergence (one of several in the book) is a shared belief that the aesthetic may offer one of the great vehicles for the reconciliation of human differences. This, in the end, is the theme of the book. It is both a plea for and an exercise in collaboration, in the belief that if, as members of the human race, we don't hang together then we may well find ourselves hanging separately more often than we would wish..

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[Back to current electronic table of contents](#)