Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it**. This periodical – distributed by Rob Greenaway & Associates – shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, and others, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective.

This edition looks into free will, and feelings of something or other. I'm not sure if your reading on is a matter of your choice.

Free will

The concept of free will is fundamental to most inquiries into the human condition. And there is a whole pile of lengthy discourse out there if you go digging. Sam Harris' book *Free Will* appealed to me because it is short and well-named, and touted as being on the *New York Times* best seller list.[1] I'm still trying to work out if it's just short and annoying.

Harris' argument is that there is no such thing as free will, and I think that's an easy position. If you take a reductionist approach to our brains, they are nothing more than a low-wattage collection of cells sharing chemicals and electric charge. Harris uses, as one of his main platforms, the premise that we are unaware of the decisions that the brain makes until it's finished its magical calculations and somehow presents us with a preferred option or desire. The critical bit is that the brain makes the choice before we are aware of it. There is a delay between whatever calculation or assessment the brain makes and our conscious desire to act on it – and we do not control that process.

How does the brain make its choice? Harris argues that it is the culmination of the brain's physical make-up and the experience to which it has been exposed. A person with an abusive childhood is more likely to be abusive in later life. A person with a brain injury or, say, foetal alcohol syndrome, may have consequent behavioural problems. To what degree is their behaviour a matter of free will? If you are determined to overcome your limitations or the effects of a brain injury, Harris states that this is because you just happen to carry around a determined brain. If you're lazy, well, blame the slack attitude of your neurotransmitters.

I got a little huffy reading Harris. Which is a real conundrum if he's right – perhaps I have the sort of brain which doesn't like its secrets being revealed?

But it's definitely worth thinking about. This January my father died after 93 excellent years (he sold his last boat when he was 91), and he had an excellent death, with just a few months of apparent dementia; but a quite happy version. We were lucky to have had wonderful care and to be able support him as his health deteriorated and his brain began failing. We had some interesting conversations over Christmas:

"If we slipped that woman $20, do you think she'd nip out and get us some scallops?"

"No Dad. She's an emergency department nurse. I don't think buying seafood is part of her job."

"Oh. OK….

"What about $40?"

We accept that with dementia, the brain is at fault, and not the person. We easily separate the brain and the personality when there is a diagnosed mental problem – such as a loss of short-term memory – but not when we are apparently functioning 'normally'.

Neurologist Oliver Sacks writes about the determinism of the brain in such wonderful books as *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* and *The Mind's Eye*. Have you had days when almost everyone you see looks strangely familiar, or you experience déjà vu? I get the latter, especially when I forget that I *have* previously done the same thing in the same place. But I have also experienced the former, and it's rather unsettling, although not unpleasant.

According to Sacks, déjà vu and what he calls 'hyper familiarity' are linked. They are experiences of familiarity without recognition, or the reverse. Apparently it's all to do with how your brain's 'fusiform face area' interacts with your hippocampi and amygdala.[2] A sense of déjà vu is not something I choose, predict or encourage. I would certainly not choose 'hyper familiarity', since I can't remember the names of the people I know well, and the concept of meeting a lot of vaguely familiar people simultaneously is a bit of a worry.

The deeper and more broadly you dig, the easier it is to find arguments that support a reductionist, deterministic view of how the brain works and, ipso facto, of free will. However, the ever-reliable philosopher AC Grayling points out that despite the vast amount of behind-the-scenes computation that the subconscious brain makes, we remain conscious of our choices, and so stay in free control.[3] Harris argues that this consciousness and any subsequent decision to do something else is also a consequence of the machinations of the sub-conscious. It's a difficult and circuitous argument.

But who cares? If free will does exist or doesn't, what difference does it make?

Grayling puts it like this: "The ethical idea of being responsible for things that you do and being capable of making choices – where there are genuine alternatives – is not only so deeply rooted in our picture of what it is to be a human being – what it is to be a citizen of a moral universe – but it is also indispensable to our … explanations of human action. You try to remove that out of the picture; you get a type of incoherence in thinking about human nature."

[1] Harris, S. 2012. *Free Will*. Free Press

[2] Sacks, O. 2010. *The Mind's Eye*. Picador

[3] http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/audio/2009/nov/30/science-weekly-podcast-ac-grayling Science Weekly: Philosopher AC Grayling defends human free will, 30 Nov 2009.

Grayling asserts that free will is not an illusion, and that the agreed function of the sub-conscious does not nullify our ability to apply a conscious ethical framework to our choices.

In law we do not punish those who are considered not responsible for their actions, or we apply degrees of culpability. In New Zealand, a person aged under 10 cannot be prosecuted for murder or manslaughter. Prison sentences and other punishments recognise mitigating factors. You could conclude that the law takes the stance that free will exists in degrees.

With the law in mind, Harris does not dismiss the role of punishments and incentives just because our will is not free. He states that a variety of human behaviours can be modified by these things. I know they work on our kids. Indeed, Harris' proposition is one of compassion. It encourages us to reflect on our own good fortunes (which may include a favourable genome, stable country of birth, access to education, the ability to remember names and the ethical fitness of our parents) and to consider those things which affect others and which are beyond their control. It provides a strong humanist framework, and is an important consideration if, for example, we view punishment predominantly as revenge. He concludes:

"… it is wise to hold people responsible for their actions when doing so influences their behaviour and brings benefits to society. But this does not mean that we must be taken in by the illusion of free will. We need only acknowledge that efforts matter and that people can change…. It may seem paradoxical to hold people responsible for what happens in their corner of the universe, but once we break the spell of free will, we can do this precisely to the degree that it is useful. Where people can change, we can demand that they do so. Where change is impossible, or unresponsive to demands, we can chart some other course. In improving ourselves and society, we are working directly with the forces of nature, for there is nothing but nature to work with."

It's very annoying that it makes sense. Can I make my brain remember people's names? Oddly, I often can if they stay sitting in the same place as when I was first introduced to them. I can recall the name of the song, but not the singer. We have all been dealt certain cards. But, most of us know that our actions, or lack of them, affect others. We influence and are influenced in return. Collectively, we have the potential to create a civil society. We can't do it individually. I'd like to think that a civil society will result from a collective and compassionate understanding of human behaviour, based on inquiry and communication. Does understanding free will matter? It certainly does if we think that evil exists beyond the human condition or is an entity in itself.

So does – or should – free will exist? I'm firmly on both sides of the argument. Either way, the opportunity exists to influence and be influenced for the better. ❖

Hambledon

One of my favourite books is *The Meaning of Liff* by Douglas Adams and John Lloyd.[4] It is a technical dictionary of sociological and physical phenomena; and I say that with a straight face. For example, the word 'lowther' is a verb, meaning: (of a large group of people who have been to the cinema together) to stand aimlessly about on the pavement and argue about whether to go and eat either a Chinese meal nearby or an Indian meal at a restaurant which somebody says is very good but isn't certain where it is, or have a drink and think about it, or just go home, or have a Chinese meal nearby – until by the time agreement is reached everything is shut.

The same applies to a group of consultants after a hearing.

I get a sense of 'hambledon' when I contemplate Euler's equation. And I can only contemplate it, because it'll take too much effort to understand.

$$e^{i\pi}+1=0$$

The equation is $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$. That is: e, to the power of i times pi, plus one, equals zero. e is Euler's number, which is used to calculate natural logarithms. i is an imaginary number and is what you get from $i^2 = -1$. π is just pi, the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter.[5]

Both Euler's number and pi are irrational numbers – those ones that keep on going forever after the decimal point. In terms of i, how you square something and get a negative number is a mystery to me. But put it all together in that order and you get zero.

Hambledon is a noun, meaning: the sound of a single-engine aircraft flying by, heard whilst lying in a summer field in England, which somehow concentrates the silence and sense of space and timelessness and leaves one with a profound feeling of something or other. ❖

For Your Interest

The past 12 months have been very interesting, and with little pause. I know the New Zealand health system doesn't get it right all the time, and this is the same for any bureaucracy, but the care – both public and private – given to my father in his last 12 months shows that we have the capacity to be brilliant. Participating in a good death, like my Dad's, gave us pause for thought about what is important in life, as does any death. Whatever happens, there will be things we regret at the end, but we're all fallible and we do the best with the cards we're dealt; or at least we should. It is a challenge to maximise our and others' happiness considering life's pressures, but the tools to help, at all levels, are available. For me, there are more important things to learn than everyone's names, and I won't be reaching for any tools in that kit. I'd rather go mountain biking with my son, talk with my daughter and enjoy time with my wife, our friends and my many excellent work colleagues (even if I start with "How are *you*?" and not "How are you, John?").

On the work front, there's been a bit going on since last winter. Projects I've been contributing to include: Plan Change 3 on the Waitaki Catchment Water Allocation Plan for Meridian; a water storage resource consent for Rangitata Diversion Race Management Ltd; a plan change for a tourism development in Queenstown; a plan change for a marine farm in the Marlborough Sounds; surveys of river use on the Maitai and Roding Rivers and a reserve management plan for the Brook Recreation Reserve for the Nelson City Council (the latter being the most complex bit of reserve work I've done); a consent hearing for the Around the Mountains Cycle Trail for the Southland District Council; a management plan for Tasman's Great Taste Trail for the Tasman District Council; a study of jet boating in Canterbury for ECan with Ken Hughey of Lincoln University; a national survey of volunteers for LandSAR; harbour deepening projects for Refining NZ (Whangarei), CentrePort (Wellington) and Lyttelton Port, and the Lyttelton Port Recovery Plan; a roading assessment for Auckland Transport (Redoubt Road); a masterplan for Mount Victoria for the Wellington City Council with the remarkable Megan Wraight and her team; evidence for Silver Fern Farms; assessment work for Fonterra at Studholme and Whareroa; a land exchange for Fulton Hogan; a hydro scheme for Westpower; evidence for the Christchurch Adventure Park proposal; preparation for the *Rena* consent hearing; and a few other small tasks.

More importantly, I recently bought my first new bike. Until now they have all been pre-loved. When it turned up in the box I thought they'd left something out, like the wheels. But no – it is almost half the weight of my 15-year-old treadly. With 29" wheels, I cannot believe the difference – rather like going from a Mk3 Cortina (I've sworn off Roman numerals) to a new Toyota Corolla. And Nelson has the most incredible local mountain bike resources. The Dun Mountain Trail is quite extraordinary. Life's good.

[4] Adams, D. Lloyd, J. 1983. *The Meaning of Liff*. Pan Books

[5] Bellos, A. 2014. *Alex Through the Looking-glass - how life reflects numbers and numbers reflect life*. Bloomsbury