Clearing the Fields: Solutions to the Global Land Mines Crisis

Ed Kevin M Cahill

Clearing the Fields is a collection of essays arising from a symposium held in New York last year. It is a most disturbing book, which is already influencing discussions taking place in many nations and organisations such as the UN. Those who read it cannot but feel an overwhelming sense of disgust at what is being perpetrated in so many not-so-distant lands.

What happens when a farmer tilling his field steps on a mine, or a child scoops the clay to grasp the brightly coloured plastic that buckles from the soil? The short answer

Who will read The Healing Arts (Oxford University Press, £18.99, ISBN 0 19 262319)? Readers who know of the successful efforts of the editor, R S Downie, professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow, to broaden the humanistic base of medical teaching, will need no persuading. For others this is a truly extraordinary anthology of prose, poetry, musical extracts, and illustrations, designed to show how insights into health and sickness can be provided by the arts.

A lucky dip can give only a taste of the breadth and variety. The illustrations range from Leonardo and Rembrandt (his exquisite Two Women Teaching a Child to Walk is shown here) to John Bellany, Roy Calne, and Posy Simmonds's cartoons. There are descriptions of their illnesses by famous composers, Fanny Burney's searing account of her mastectomy, the story of the military surgeon James Barry, who turned out to be a woman, and a long extract from Joseph Heller's Catch-22.

Nearly two thirds of the poems are from the 20th century, and none the worse for that. Auden and Larkin are obvious editorial favourites; doctor poets include Edward Lowbury, Dannie Abse, and Miroslav Holub. Handel, Schubert, and Stephen Sondheim are among those who provide the music. To stretch the imagination and deepen medical understanding are the editor's aims—try him and see.
Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain
Antonio R Damasio
Picador, £16.99, pp 312
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Documentary makers find the brain sexy at present; surf the television channels and the workings of the psyche are hard to avoid: violence, paraphilias, psychopathy, all are explained.

Brain books are similarly popular. They come in three varieties. There is the "you’re only" school: you’re only a cluster of neurons (Francis Crick), processes (Daniel Dennett), microtubules (Sir Roger Penrose) and so on in a reductionist vein. Humans are considered from a pathological/laboratory perspective. Computer metaphors abound (your mind is your software!) and there are boxes and arrows in profusion. Such books usually end with an appeal to our higher instincts: yes you are only a cluster of x or y but that is no reason to be pessimistic! Dennett even holds out the possibility of eternal life (as a computer program).

Second: biography, where the struggling individual is treated like a person, his plight infused with what Victor Frankl termed values (only humans may choose to imbue suffering with meaning and purpose). Oliver Sacks (literary/artistic), Harold Klawans (detective neurology), and Anthony Storr (eclectic/analytic) are the main exponents.

Finally there is dualism; very fashionable and out of step with contemporary neuroscience. Sir John Eccles hypothesises "psychons" which act at the synapse by quantum mechanics (and thus preserve the possibility of a soul beyond the body).

Descartes’ (dualistic) error is here interpreted as splitting the brain from the body. Antonio Damasio, a respected neurologist, wishes to reintegrate the two. His mode is reductionism in sheep’s clothing (but for some reason he repeatedly denies this). He begins with the oft told story of Phineas Gage, a man whose personality was radically changed by the passage of a tamping iron through his frontal lobes. Gage underwent such a change that those who knew him said "he was no longer Gage." He displayed the lack of social skills and forward planning we now associate with the frontal lobe syndrome. He died in penury.

Damasio is interested in subjects who reason inadequately "because" they do not feel. His population is brain damaged and shares many characteristics with psychopaths. He wishes to show the following: (a) that emotions are necessary for reasoning; (b) that they are "represented" in the brain as state (his "somatic-marker" hypothesis); (c) that the right parietal lobe is the site of such representation (on the basis of anosognosia); and (d) that ventromedial frontal pathology impairs reasoning (specifically that encompassing emotions or values).

Each point is potentially interesting but never fully elucidated. The relevant data are submerged beneath frequent reiterations of the main theme, and the author never quite decides on the relations between his regions of interest. In an era which values connectedness and the parallel processing properties of the brain Damasio fails to avoid a narrow localisation of mental faculties. His references are highly selective, and his inclination of philosophy and endocrinology is minimal.

Towards the end Damasio appeals to our need for altruism and values in society. He believes that science will bring about equality. Would that this were so.—SEAN SPENCE, research fellow, MRC cyclotron unit, Hammersmith Hospital, London

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