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Damasio's error

I was pleased that two readers of my article (Identity: It's a no-brainer; **CPF208**) were prompted to write letters in response, mostly commenting favourably. The contribution by Stephen Weatherhead (**CPF210**) raised the possibility that my criticisms of Greenfield could not be generalised to neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio who I had merely mentioned in passing. Does Damasio retain a Cartesian framework in his theorising and is he a biological reductionist? Having reread his book *Descartes' error* (1994), I believe the answer to both questions is yes. (I have commented elsewhere on his 2000 book, *The Feeling of What Happens*, in Hallam, 2009). Damasio's discussion of Descartes is reserved for the last few pages of his book and I agree with two points he makes, first, that Descartes' separation of mind (higher mental functions) from the body is no basis for neuroscience and, second, that contemporary scientists who believe that 'the mind' can be investigated without regard for the neurobiology of the body (p.250) are really demonstrating their affinity with Descartes. What remains of Descartes in Damasio? I would say quite a lot. First of all, there are distinct concepts of mind and body – it seems that he (like many of us) cannot entirely abandon dualistic thinking. Damasio defines the mind as a process of developing neural representations 'of which one can be made conscious as images' (p.229). Mind is therefore essentially related to conscious awareness of particular images (and, in particular, bodily feelings). Damasio's aim is to explain images and feelings as the result of activities in body-plus-brain, grounding them in various centres, systems, and their reciprocal interactions. In so doing, he shares Descartes' allegiance to naturalism and materialism, at least in so far as the body is concerned. It is just that whereas Descartes stopped short of the radical materialism of some of his contemporaries (and wrote instead of mind/ body interaction), Damasio is willing to explain both mind and body in terms of neurobiology. Damasio also shares several other assumptions with Descartes. He says that we experience images as 'belonging to us' (p. 90), and therefore he must assume, like Descartes, that the simple fact of experiencing thoughts implies something about self or identity. He also assumes that there is an entity – an 'integrated mind' – although he thinks that this is brought about by a kind of neural timing trick (p.95). It is no surprise then to find Damasio claiming that all you can know for certain is

that your images are 'real to your self, and that other beings make comparable images' (p.97). He appears to assume that experiences naturally belong to a 'self' (or self-evidently prove some notion of an existing being). Descartes was not, in fact, so sure that others had minds and allowed himself to wonder whether his images of other people might simply indicate robots dressed up in conventional clothes. Damasio also assumes (presumably on the grounds that the certainties offered by experience would otherwise be compromised) that 'there is only one self for each organism', and that multiple selves are a manifestation of brain disease (p.227). *Clinical Psychology Forum 212 – August 2010 7*

In fairness, Damasio accepts that there is a problem in accounting for subjectivity, by which I think he means how we perceive our images as our own (pp. 99, 238, 241). He explains subjective ownership as a 'perpetually recreated neurobiological state'. The individuality of this state is guaranteed by the organism's unique history and repeating (neural) themes. But Damasio notes that he still hasn't explained how body representations 'become part of the self that owns them' (p.161). He restates his doubts about his own concept of subjectivity when he writes that 'the existence of a representation of self does not make that self know that its corresponding organism is responding' (p.241). What Damasio cannot explain is the great variety of experiences of being a self, for instance, the distinction between self and non-self experiences, multiple selves, or a person's sense that they lack a self or feel that they are acting like robots. Damasio does attempt to explain subjectivity in neural terms but I am afraid that, at this point, I rather lose the train of his reasoning when he refers to a 'metaself', 'third-party neuron ensembles', 'convergence zones', and 'dispositional representations'. All this might not be neuro-mythology but I remain to be convinced. In any event, he eventually claims to have described a 'neural device capable of producing subjectivity' and one 'that does not require language' (p.243). Into this mix, he rather gratuitously throws in the concept of person (p.126) and a 'concept' of self that makes use of autobiographical memories (p.238) but not in a way that allows us to grasp the whole picture. In my view, there are several interrelated conceptual issues and the complexities cannot be clarified by seeking a causal explanation solely in terms of the neurobiology of the brain plus body. Of course, Damasio refers to events outside the boundary of the organism but it is revealing that his preferred term in this connection is 'juxtaposition', indicating to me that he excludes social and cultural influences

from the systemic and dynamic interactions taking place within the brain/ body. Damasio's idea of an individual self seems to be modeled on that of pioneer natural philosophers, such as Descartes himself, who, having discarded a God-given perspective on the world, began to work things out for themselves by reasoning about their experimental observations of the world. This perspective is atomistic and ego-centric. We need to extend the causal conceptualisation of mind/body to include the socio-cultural environment as an integrated component of a dynamic system, not merely as a juxtaposed, contingent 'trigger' or constraining factor. Damasio has certainly moved on from Descartes' ideas but, in protesting his errors, he still gives the impression of an infant assailing his parent with a rather puny fist.

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Reference

Hallam, R.S. (2009). *Virtual selves, real persons: A dialogue across disciplines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.