

Brain and mind: who is the puppet and who the puppeteer?

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The question in the title has fundamental social and legal implications. If the mind controls the brain, then there is FREE WILL and its corollaries, responsibility and dignity. If the brain controls the mind then there can be no FREE WILL because we cannot influence the brain connections and neurotransmitters that make the decisions for us. Hippocrates expressed what is taught in neuroscience today. “Men ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain only, arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and jests, as well as our sorrows, pain, griefs and tears.” Neuroscience, considers the mind to be the activity of the brain (Hebb, 1949) and believes there is no ghostly substance inside us. Consistent with this, psychology abandoned the concept “soul” in the 1930s. Behavior is the outcome of two influences: genetic endowment and environment — nature and nurture. As Praxiteles sculpted Hermes out of a block of marble, so experience sculpts our character from the genetic material we are granted. Importantly, we have no choice of parents or the society we are born in. If only we could abandon our undesirable desires, our depression, our obsessions, our compulsions, our unrequited love. If only we were the authors of our thoughts and not merely observers of what the brain presents us. If only we could get hold of one of the strings with which our brain makes us dance. It seems the puppet is free only in as much as it loves its strings (Harris, 2012).