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Who's In Charge?: Free Will And The Science Of The Brain



Synopsis

The father of cognitive neuroscience and author of *Human* offers a provocative argument against the common belief that our lives are wholly determined by physical processes and we are therefore not responsible for our actions. A powerful orthodoxy in the study of the brain has taken hold in recent years: Since physical laws govern the physical world and our own brains are part of that world, physical laws therefore govern our behavior and even our conscious selves. Free will is meaningless, goes the mantra; we live in a "determined" world. Not so, argues the renowned neuroscientist Michael S. Gazzaniga in this thoughtful, provocative book based on his Gifford Lectures - one of the foremost lecture series in the world dealing with religion, science, and philosophy. *Who's in Charge?* proposes that the mind, which is somehow generated by the physical processes of the brain, "constrains" the brain just as cars are constrained by the traffic they create. Writing with what Steven Pinker has called "his trademark wit and lack of pretension", Gazzaniga shows how determinism immeasurably weakens our views of human responsibility; it allows a murderer to argue, in effect, "It wasn't me who did it - it was my brain." Gazzaniga convincingly argues that even given the latest insights into the physical mechanisms of the mind, there is an undeniable human reality: We are responsible agents who should be held accountable for our actions, because responsibility is found in how people interact, not in brains. An extraordinary book that ranges across neuroscience, psychology, ethics, and the law with a light touch but profound implications, *Who's in Charge?* is a lasting contribution from one of the leading thinkers of our time.

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Customer Reviews

This was a tough read because it's highly technical and specific, but I'm so very happy that I took the time to get through it and learn so much about the mind and the brain. I believe that knowing and understanding more about free will, where it comes from and what it really is, makes me a better neighbor, friend, parent, and spouse. Scientifically fascinating and thought provoking.

I'm not a book reviewer by any means. However, this was a wonderful book that answered many of my questions about determinism and also raised some interesting new ones. Unfortunately, Gazzaniga seems to shy away from clear, concrete conclusions, which makes it difficult to synthesize. Five of my friends also read this book and each came away with a different understanding of Gazzaniga's perspective. A very good read, though.

Gazzaniga gives us a wonderful, thought provoking book which forces the reader to examine complex systems and the ways in which they apply to brain function. Although the book starts out a bit slow, it quickly becomes captivating and difficult to put down. I not only learned a great deal from this book, I chose to read more of Gazzaniga's works. I recommend his writings to anyone interested in learning more about split-brain effects and complex systems as applied to human psyche.

Dr. Michael Gazzaniga is not only one of the most intelligent cognitive neuroscientists that I have had the pleasure to read about, but he is also very capable of conveying this intelligence in a way that is very easy to understand. In 2011, Dr. Gazzaniga wrote the book, *Who's in Charge?*. This wonderful piece looks at how our minds control who we are and what we do. He argues against the common belief that our lives are wholly determined by physical processes and he argues that in the very same way we are responsible for our actions. There are a few major flaws that present themselves throughout the book. One flaw is that the author doesn't define what he means by free will. This ends up being a major problem because the definitional problem is often the center of the debate for free will. Another flaw is that he fails to mention modern philosophers that discuss free will, selfhood and downward causation and it left me wanting a bit more in this area. Even with these flaws, the book causes one to really think about what it means to be conscious. In 2011 HarperCollins published the book *Who's in Charge?* written by Michael S. Gazzaniga, born 1939. Dr. Gazzaniga is the director of the SAGE center for the Study of

the Mind at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In 1964, he received a Ph.D. in psychobiology from the California Institute of Technology. He has made important advances in our understanding of consciousness and how the two hemispheres of the brain communicate with one another. The book has one central argument, that even though physical laws govern the physical and our brains our part of this physical world, these physical laws don't exactly govern our behavior and our conscious selves. He discusses the idea that determinism weakens our view of human responsibility. This would allow someone to argue that they did not commit the crime, instead their brain did it. He talks about these ideas in the perspective of law men, psychologists, neurologists and even physicists. The beginning of the book lays groundwork so that the average person may understand the neurology behind free will. It details how humans may not be different than other animals because of our large brain to body ratio and instead because of the connectivity of the brain. It was important to talk about this because we need to find what gives humans consciousness. It is possible that the insular cortex gives us our "mind". After this, he uses a split brain patient from his earlier work to explore the possibility of dual consciousness (which then he later disproves). This groundwork was laid out in such a way that I never felt "lost" later in the book, which I enjoyed greatly. Later on in the book he dives in to why it is important to look at how our consciousness affects our daily lives. A main topic here was that our unconscious is responsible for so many of our daily actions with our conscious mind only gives us a false explanation. A good example used here was that if you saw a rattle snake you would jump away quickly. You would say that it was because you were scared but in reality it would be because your unconscious mind made you jump. I had to read this part a couple times through, not because it was confusing, but sometimes unbelievable in a stimulating sort of way. The final portion of the book talks about the implications of free will in a law and personal responsibility setting. A major point here was that if free will was in fact a false idea, and everything we do is in fact pre-determined, then everything we do would not be under our control and therefore not our fault. In this book he not only fought the idea that we lack free will, but he also explained how detrimental it would be to society if our courtrooms believed this. Again, his ideas here flowed very well and it made me rethink some of my preconceived notions about my own self and my actions. His book has some major connections to neuroscience. First of all, Dr. Gazziniga used neuroscience to try and pin point the exact location of consciousness. He thought that if we could find what part of the brain gives us consciousness then we could possibly determine what makes us "us". Then we could also use the connections in certain brain regions to try and determine what a

person's next action would be. If we can determine what a person's next action is with 100% accuracy then it would tell us that a person's actions are pre-determined and that we have no free will. During my time reading his book, Dr. Gazzaniga has showed true understanding over multiple fields of science. In an earlier section he gracefully details how physicists see the world. Since I am no physicist myself, it could have been very easy for him to go over my head in this section. Instead he very carefully described what some major physicists believed and how that relates to the neuronal connections in our brain. He also never tries to convey his opinion without making you think long and hard on the issue. It is important to note that if you are going to read this book that you should be prepared to be challenged about your beliefs. Overall I have to give this book a 4 star rating. Never before have I read a book about neuroscience, the law, psychology and physics that tied these subjects together so seamlessly. Although this is one of the most intellectually stimulating books I have ever read, it did present itself with a few major flaws. Despite these issues, I would highly recommend this book to anyone who has found themselves wondering why people do what they do. This book truly is an intellectual feast.

Well-presented and most of it well within the understanding of most of the intellectually curious among us, the book introduces the reader to the newest technique, in drawing from the past, information to help understand the present and, hopefully give more insight into the future. It is fresh with examples in a number of fields, and at times startling in the information revealed, a learning experience.

*A full summary of this book is available here: [An Executive Summary of Michael Gazzaniga's 'Who's in Charge: Free Will and the Science of the Brain'](#) The main argument: As the study of the brain has progressed over the past century (and particularly in the past 40 years), the evidence seems to point more and more towards the idea that our sense of freedom, and of our being in control of our choices, is a mere illusion, and that our thoughts and actions are in fact as determined as the physical world around us. The idea of a determined self not only challenges our traditional understanding of ourselves, but has practical repercussions in terms of our understanding of issues such as agency and responsibility, and forces us to ask whether we can legitimately hold people accountable for their actions. Indeed, if people truly are determined to behave as they do, then they could not reasonably be considered responsible for their behaviour, and hence it would seem to be unjust to punish them for their actions, thus throwing our entire judicial system into question. These

issues have already begun to surface in our court systems, and have in fact had an impact on certain court decisions to exercise leniency on convicted offenders where this would not have occurred previously (p. 190-4). According to neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, however, this whole line of thinking is both dangerous and misguided. This proves to be the case because, for him, the findings coming out of brain science do not in fact imply a determined self. Indeed, Gazzaniga claims that the idea of a determined self is based on a misinterpretation of the relationship between the mind and the brain, and that the proper interpretation of this relationship reveals that there is room for both responsibility and accountability. To elaborate, the idea of a determined self is based on the notion that the mind and its mental states are no more than a lifeless by-product of neurochemical activity in the brain. Since this neurochemical activity operates according to fixed physical laws, it is argued that the mind itself is a by-product of these fixed physical laws, and hence could not be free. Gazzaniga agrees that the mind and its mental states emerge out of neurochemical activity in the brain. For him, though, the mind is not a lifeless by-product of this neurochemical activity. Rather, he maintains that once the mind emerges from underlying processes it takes on a life of its own, to the point where it becomes an independent force, capable of having a causal effect on the same neurochemical activity out of which it emerged, thus allowing it to influence future brain and mind states. Though this may sound somewhat suspicious, there is in fact plenty of precedent for this type of phenomenon elsewhere in nature. Indeed, it is based on the principle of emergence, which is coming to be appreciated as a major force in explaining how all sorts of complex systems emerge out of more basic building blocks. In this new light, the mind is not a determined entity, but is instead a free agent that is responsible for its actions, and hence capable of being legitimately held accountable for them. This is the argument that Gazzaniga makes in his new book 'Who's in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain'. In order to get this argument off the ground though, Gazzaniga takes us on a tour of the brain based on the latest findings from neuroscience (including what neuroscience is revealing about the question of free will), as well as a tour of the evolution of the brain. A full summary of the book is available here: [An Executive Summary of Michael Gazzaniga's 'Who's in Charge: Free Will and the Science of the Brain'](#)

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