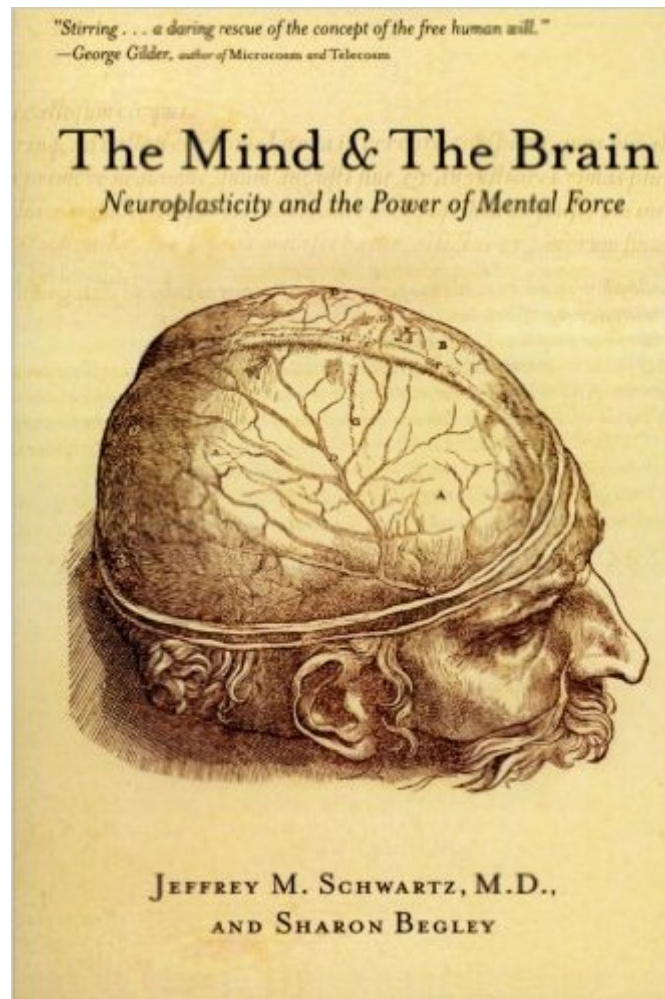


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The Mind And The Brain: Neuroplasticity And The Power Of Mental Force



Synopsis

A groundbreaking work of science that confirms, for the first time, the independent existence of the mind—and demonstrates the possibilities for human control over the workings of the brain. Conventional science has long held the position that 'the mind' is merely an illusion, a side effect of electrochemical activity in the physical brain. Now in paperback, Dr Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley's groundbreaking work, *The Mind and the Brain*, argues exactly the opposite: that the mind has a life of its own. Dr Schwartz, a leading researcher in brain dysfunctions, and *Wall Street Journal* science columnist Sharon Begley demonstrate that the human mind is an independent entity that can shape and control the functioning of the physical brain. Their work has its basis in our emerging understanding of adult neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to be rewired not just in childhood, but throughout life, a trait only recently established by neuroscientists. Through decades of work treating patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), Schwartz made an extraordinary finding: while following the therapy he developed, his patients were effecting significant and lasting changes in their own neural pathways. It was a scientific first: by actively focusing their attention away from negative behaviors and toward more positive ones, Schwartz's patients were using their minds to reshape their brains—and discovering a thrilling new dimension to the concept of neuroplasticity. *The Mind and the Brain* follows Schwartz as he investigates this newly discovered power, which he calls self-directed neuroplasticity or, more simply, mental force. It describes his work with noted physicist Henry Stapp and connects the concept of 'mental force' with the ancient practice of mindfulness in Buddhist tradition. And it points to potential new applications that could transform the treatment of almost every variety of neurological dysfunction, from dyslexia to stroke—and could lead to new strategies to help us harness our mental powers. Yet as wondrous as these implications are, perhaps even more important is the philosophical dimension of Schwartz's work. For the existence of mental force offers convincing scientific evidence of human free will, and thus of man's inherent capacity for moral choice.

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Customer Reviews

I was having a bit of a philosophical crisis when I went looking for a book on free will and determinism -- I had discovered that deep down, I really didn't believe in free will. That was a surprise, since consciously I thought the idea of fate was absurd. I always thought that my brain had been programmed to be the way it was through my genes and the way I was raised, and that the best I could do was to not get too upset about the way I am, do whatever came to me, and hope for some life-changing experience to make things better. After some research on the internet I decided to do what William James and Abraham Maslow did and "act as if" I had free will, and see if I got the same extraordinary results they did (both had been depressed determinists and were "cured" once they gave free will an active try). I still wanted intellectual confirmation though, and I came across this book at the bookstore and bought it on a hunch. This book has blown my mind. Schwartz' cognitive-therapy work with obsessive-compulsive patients leads us to ask the question, "How is it that a strictly mental process can result in measurable brain changes as shown on PET scans?" Is it caused by another part of the brain? Even if it is, that just postpones the question, because what caused that part of the brain to be any different this time? He makes the case that conscious experience isn't reduceable to anything more fundamental -- try having a colorblind researcher truly understand the color "red" by tracing physical and chemical changes in the brain. Combine that with the fact in quantum mechanics that observation affects which reality it is that shows up, and he proposes a kind of fundamental "mental force" and does a much better job of explaining it than I've done here.

I bought this book anticipating a different perspective on this timeless question. A different perspective is exactly what I found. Schwartz begins with a description of his research on obsessive-compulsive disorder. This section of the book is simply great. It is a nice example of how advances in neurobiological investigation have helped to elucidate the neural circuitry that underlies psychological states. Schwartz also gives a nice overview of the current views on consciousness. He

then goes on to discuss the topic of neuroplasticity citing the case of the Silver Springs monkeys. You get a nice history lesson in addition to a summary of some hard won facts about the brain. He also gives plenty of examples of neuroplasticity in humans. He uses this as the physical basis of his own stylized treatment for OCD. His treatment is based on the concept of a mental force (a nebulous concept if there ever was one) that is able to change the brain through the principles of quantum mechanics. He devotes the rest of his book to discussing the quantum mind as well as some implications of the theory as it applies to consciousness. It is the last third of the book that attempts to explain the concept of a mental force that interacts with the physical substance of the brain (through quantum mechanics) to ultimately produce behavior. The problem as I see it, is that Schwartz believes that consciousness is an emergent property of the brain, in that it is more than the sum of its mere physical parts. He seems to be unable to accept the idea that our mental lives are reducible entirely to physical processes. Many of Schwartz's conclusions in this book are based on his a priori assumption that the mind is more than the brain.

There's a lot of interesting and useful information in this book, but it's not without its flaws. On the positive side:- The descriptions of experiments on the brain are fascinating. So are the descriptions of experiments in quanta mechanics and the resulting paradoxes.- I find the conclusions regarding the brain's ability to rewire itself quite inspiring.- I also find very interesting the idea that Buddhist meditation may be driving neuroplastic changes; it is implied that this physiological change--unbeknownst to the practitioner--is what is actually gained through meditation.- I admire authors' drive to bring science to questions regarding sentience, although it isn't clear how successful they are; as others have said, taking the evidence provided to the conclusions provided requires a leap of faith. In any case, it's a start from which others may build. On the flip side:- I found myself reading reworded versions of the same idea over and over. It was as if the authors were themselves trying to rewire the reader's brain through repetitive exercises. Unfortunately, this makes the reader lose attention, thus undermining this goal.- There is a lot of text that attempts to add a human interest perspective. Maybe this was considered important to the commercial appeal the book. But, for this reader, it only diluted the value.- As mentioned by many others, the authors do not provide convincing evidence to support their conclusions on free will. For example, the authors provide very interesting details about quanta mechanics and the evidence that the universe is not deterministic.

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