

Homeostatic Balance: A Critique of Bryan Ackerman's Essay on 'Me, Myself, and My Amygdala'

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Different theorists, coming from different backgrounds, different paradigms, different perspectives, different integrative ideas, offer up different theories that reflect both these different backgrounds, and what the theorist is offering up in terms of what he or she is promoting as a new and important 'evolution in knowledge'. Oftentimes the technical language is different based on the paradigm that the theorist is coming from and working within. Two different theorists using different technical language could be working on the same, or very similar, clinical problems. The map, the model, the classification system is never the same thing as the territory that the theorist's representation is meant to, or supposed to, represent.

With this in mind, and using partly similar, partly different, language, I respectfully offer up a critique of Bryan Ackerman's latest essay on 'Me, Myself, and My Amygdala'. A healthy dualistic and/or dialectic debate can lead to a faster, more spirited, and expansive growth of evolutionary knowledge in a field.

Ackerman has offered up a healthy, creative integration between Mindfulness and Neurology. However, I find a few problems with his model and classification system that I will expand on now.

The type of critique that I am about to unfold here is very similar to the type of critique that Romantic Philosophy launched against Enlightenment Philosophy back in the time of Rousseau, Goethe, Schelling, and Nietzsche. Quite simply put, reason does not solve all of man's problems -- in fact, quite frankly, oftentimes, man's reasoning process -- meaning higher cortex functioning -- is man's problem. There is just as much potential -- and actuality -- for 'neurosis' in man's 'higher' brain functions as there is in his 'lower' brain functions.

We can call not only the amygdala but the whole surrounding region of this area -- meaning the Temporal Lobe, the Midbrain, and what used to be called 'The Limbic System' -- our 'Monkey Brain' if we wish, but this 'Monkey Brain' has kept us alive and evolving for thousands and thousands of years.

Firstly, our amygdala is the center of our 'fright, flight, and/or fight' mechanism. This defense mechanism can supersede any response from any part of our 'higher cortex region' -- it can, in effect, 'hijack' our frontal cortex, or overpower it, in the name of a perceived need for an almost instantaneous, life or death, stimulus and response. Sensory information can go straight to our amygdala and generate an almost immediate response as opposed to going to the frontal cortex first and then going to the amygdala -- by which time we could be dead. So our amygdala and the whole surrounding area of the Midbrain and Limbic System, although being the oldest part of our brain, does not deserve to be called our 'Monkey Brain' or our 'Caveman Brain' without giving this part of our brain its due respect in keeping us alive, and not extinct, like the dinosaur.

Secondly, there are just as many 'pre-meditated crimes' -- perhaps more -- in human history and human behavior, as there are 'crimes of passion'. Higher brain function doesn't necessarily guarantee 'higher humanism', and there have been -- and still are -- more sociopaths and psychopaths with 'high brain functions' than anyone can possibly count.

So to equate 'higher brain function' with 'humanism' is completely misguided.

One of the first things that criminal profilers do is to diagnose from the crime scene whether the perpetrator of the crime was 'organized' or 'disorganized'. In the case of serial killers and the like, an 'organized' killer can be more dangerous than a 'disorganized' one. In this respect, we can differentiate between a primarily 'Limbic System Killer' (disorganized and randomly impulsive) vs. a 'Limbic and Frontal Cortex Killer' (organized and pre-meditated) in which case we are (or criminal profilers are) looking for a much smarter killer.

The Frontal Cortex, in giving us the evolutionary advantage of a greater ability than other animals to abstract, generalize, associate, integrate or synthesize, does not necessarily give us the 'immunity' of using this part of our brain properly. Sometimes it is the Frontal Cortex that needs to be 'reigned in' -- not our amygdala. Sometimes it is our Frontal Cortex that can be our 'Wild Bronco' -- and we are the rider that may not, does not, know how to 'ride' our Frontal Cortex properly.

Classification and playing the 'Fitting Game' can be an issue here as many of the so-called 'higher emotional responses and functions' that Ackerman equates with our 'Higher Brain Function' and 'Higher Self', I equate with the Limbic -- Amygdala -- part of the brain.

Specifically, it is well documented in neurology research that the greatest area of dopamine receptors, neuro-transmitters, and activity is in the Limbic part of the brain, the midbrain, and the amygdala area. This is where all our main pleasure, pain, and emotional responses come from -- not in the frontal cortex. Where do our sexual and orgasmic responses originate? Our limbic area -- not our frontal cortex. Eliminate our 'monkey brain' and no one in the human species would be motivated to 'monkey around'. We would be extinct like the dinosaur -- not to mention living a 'passionless life' before we went extinct.

So, I agree that Mindfulness -- introspection without judgment -- can be good. But all parts of the brain can be equally good or bad, healthy or neurotic, caring or uncaring, ethical or non-ethical, civil or uncivil.

So give our 'amygdala' -- and the whole Limbic, Midbrain Region -- our 'Monkey Brain' -- its just due. Yes, it can be the center of addiction, over-impulsiveness, and obsessive-compulsion. But in contra-distinction to what Ackerman is arguing, I suggest that it is the Limbic-Midbrain-Amygdala that is the center of all human emotional passion -- good and bad -- with impulsiveness comes spontaneity, this is our primary romantic, creative, and spiritual region -- not our Frontal Cortex.

What we call 'The Heart of Man' -- both at its best and at its worst -- is more closely connected to our amygdala than to our frontal cortex.

Our frontal cortex gives us 'Spock'. But reason isn't everything about what it means to be human and reason can be manipulative, exploitive, and uncaring. We could all be Stepford Husbands and Wives, and Children. But that is not what it means to be human.

Sometimes we just want to 'monkey around' with our husbands or wives, our boyfriends or girlfriends -- and this doesn't always have to involve sexuality, just playfulness -- such as with our children, or watching our children (and grandchildren).

So let us not negatively stereotype our Amygdala -- or monkeys.

Monkeys have been around longer than we have according to evolutionary theory -- and have created a lot less heinous crimes.

Both the Amygdala-Limbic area of the brain and the Frontal Cortex have biological functions to perform -- ideally in harmony with each other. When both are functioning properly, and on the same page as each other, it can be cause for health, happiness, and celebration, all else being equal. However, when things break down in any region of the brain, specifically these two as they pertain to our discussion here, it can be a recipe for disaster -- a 'Birth of Tragedy' rather than a 'Birth of Celebration'.

We need 'homeostatic balance' between both important regions of the brain.

Sometimes the smartest people can be the most insane people
-- David Gordon Bain

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