

Socrates and Scientists: How Modern Neuroscience Supports the *Phaedrus*' Account of a Rational Madness

For the *Phaedrus*' Socrates, the road to reason is paved with madness. In order to obtain rational knowledge of the Truth, one must completely succumb to divine possession. But isn't this idea necessarily contradictory? Isn't the idea of a "rational madness" oxymoronic? For Socrates and scientists the answer is "no." This paper will argue that Socrates was onto something quite true about the way the human brain works, as a series of incredible experiments over two thousand years later have begun to uncover.

Every day, we are faced with an onslaught of perceptions that cause us to act. Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga asks: "How do we decode the brain's cacophony?" How do we manage to feel in control when our decisions are compelled by external forces not available to our conscious brains? His answer, arrived at by means of split-brain research, is that the left hemisphere of our brain – "the interpreter module" – takes the bits of information it has, no matter how disparate and nonsensical, and tells a coherent story to conscious awareness. Through a series of fascinating experiments, researchers were able to observe the left hemisphere's interpreting tendency at work.

For instance, in one experiment, researchers flashed the word "WALK" to the unconscious portions of a subject's brain. He immediately stood and began walking around the testing room after receiving this direct command. However, when asked why he was walking, the subject, unaware of the true reason behind the compulsion to walk, made up an answer based on the information available to his conscious mind: "I wanted to go get a Coke." These experiments show (oftentimes to humorous effect) that even when the stimulus for an action is unknown to our conscious brains, our left hemisphere will create a *post hoc* narrative to explain

it.

Plato identifies the same “cacophony” of perceptions that Gazzaniga describes. An important theme of the *Phaedrus* is how we are to make sense of this overwhelming noise: How do we know what is truth and what is not? Socrates’ answer is the same as Gazzaniga: we are compelled toward reason even when we don’t understand the compulsion itself. Our conscious brains use the elements that *are* available to it to weave a reasonable narrative explaining our actions or beliefs.

This paper will conclude by arguing that the *Phaedrus*’ mythical account of the soul is a perfect example of such a *post hoc* divinely-inspired narrative. By acting in the same way as the brain’s “interpreter module,” Socrates uses sense perceptions available to his conscious mind in combination with divine inspiration to compose a myth describing the composition and workings of the human soul. This *post-hoc* narrative, though born from madness, gets us closer to a rational understanding of the way the soul operates. Although it may seem contradictory for madness to lead to reason, new evidence supports Socrates’ account that this is, indeed, how the human brain does operate.

Bibliography

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