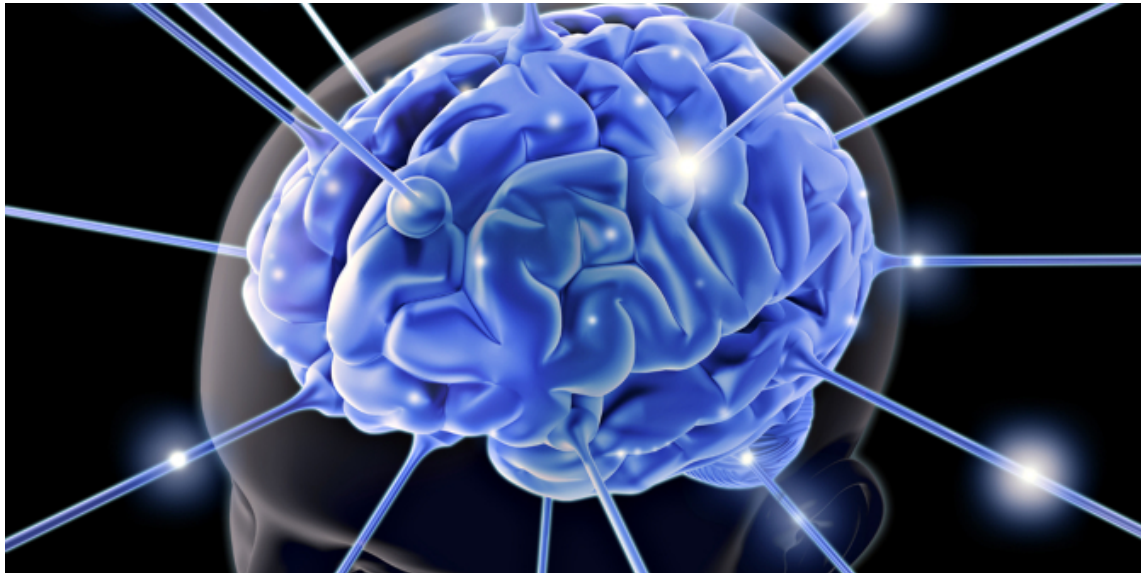


Corporate social responsibility and the dehumanisation of people



One of the hallmarks of moral and ethical progress in the world of business has been the increasing recognition of just how embedded organisations are in the wider social, cultural and physical environments that they occupy. It might seem a trite notion to many now, but the idea that firms influence – and are influenced by – the wider world around them represents a hard-fought dialectical engagement which is still very much a work in progress. It wasn't long ago that many companies were allowed to routinely pollute the physical environment with impunity and engage in labour relations practices that would strike us as a form of borderline indentured servitude these days. We've come a long way to be sure, even if there is still much important work to be done in particular industrial, organisational and national contexts.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are widely recognised as having been a chief influence in this broadly positive trend. While CSR doesn't fit neatly under any one catch-all definition, it is basically predicated on the idea that corporations and their activities don't (and can't) exist in a vacuum; that inevitably their business activities will have *some* impact on *something* or *someone*. And such impacts needn't be purely economic just because corporations are primarily economic units themselves. Indeed, most of CSR's appeal is arguably right there in the acronym – it's about a responsibility to the *social* realm in which the corporation finds itself. To the degree that a corporation can do business practically, if not profitably, it has to do so on terms which wider society deems acceptable with respect to any non-economic actors that might be caught in its proverbial crosshairs.

And yet, when push comes to shove, CSR initiatives actually *don't* make these kinds of social considerations a front-and-centre concern. CSR is probably more accurately described as a case of corporations simply maximising what they can get away with in the wider social environment. This observation needn't be interpreted cynically. It's actually a fairly ordinary instance of straightforward cost-benefit analysis applied to the macro context. How much can we prospect the ocean for oil without transgressing international environmental law? What is the minimum amount of remuneration required to pay someone in order to both comply with employment law and maintain company profitability? To employ some highfalutin philosophical jargon, CSR is utilitarian, not deontological. The environment and the people in it are simply parts of the equation, not the ends in and of themselves.

Cost-benefit tradeoffs of this kind engage a part of the human brain called the task-positive network (TPN). This is the network in the brain that is recruited when we engage in many forms of analytical, mathematical and logical reasoning. When you're solving a math problem or doing last month's books, your TPN is reliably activated to press the right parts of your brain into the service of these tasks.

The problem, as it relates to the notion of corporate *social* responsibility, is that the activation of your TPN more often than not results in the *deactivation* of your brain's default-mode network (DMN). Your DMN is the network in your brain that is activated, as the name suggests, when your brain is in its default or resting state. But it is also the network in the brain that is recruited in response to all manner of social and interpersonal stimuli. It is responsible for how we empathise with other people, and make ethical and moral judgements about them. It is also the source of how we categorise both ourselves and others in social terms, and make inferences and evaluations about our place and the place of others in the social world.

When we engage our TPNs, we disengage our DMNs; a phenomenon known as the *opposing domains hypothesis*. Experimental studies have shown that these two distinct brain networks are both independent of one another and suppressive of one another. When you're tasked with solving a math problem, your faculties for engaging in social and interpersonal reasoning temporarily switch off. Likewise, when you're tasked with some sort of social categorisation task, your faculties for doing math also switch over in response to the task at hand.

The unfortunate upshot here is that research has shown that sustained activation of the TPN can lead people to *dehumanise* other people. That is, to view other people in instrumental or mechanistic terms, rather than as fellow brothers and sisters with their own individual humanity, personhood, minds, goals, and so forth – a perspective-taking which requires activation of the DMN. Even seemingly inconsequential instances of engagement in analytical and mathematical reasoning have been demonstrated to reduce empathic concern and prosocial behaviours. What this means is that individuals performing what might be completely ordinary aspects of their job role may, at best, unwittingly be experiencing unanticipated deficits in their ability to empathise with other people. At worst, they may be viewing those around them as pawns more than people.

CSR, as it is currently conceived of and practiced, essentially represents this phenomenon extended to a society-wide level. When the powers-that-be at a corporation sit down to draft up some new CSR initiative based on the kind of cost-benefit analysis referenced earlier, each person involved in that analysis is recruiting a part of their brain that is used to treat every input – other fellow human beings included – as a number or an abstraction. However much such people might bristle at the proposition, effectively lining up the people who might be affected by some company policy on one side of a balance sheet *is* a form of dehumanisation. CSR initiatives don't proceed from the foundational importance placed on the lived experience and personhood of those that corporate practices might have some effect upon, and don't engage the network in the brain required to make such considerations a foremost priority.

In order to continue making valuable progress with respect to the role and influence of corporations in society at large, it would be worthwhile to be mindful of just how closely the normative tension between profitable corporate activity and social responsibility might mirror the neurological tension between analytic reasoning and social, empathic reasoning in our own brains.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [Corporate Social Responsibility and Dehumanization](#), in *Philosophy of Management*.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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Gareth Craze is a doctoral student in the department of organisational behaviour at Case Western Reserve University. A native of New Zealand, he received his Bachelors in management and employment relations and his Masters in management from the University of Auckland. Gareth's research interests centre on the nexus between evolutionary theory, business philosophy and cognitive science, with his general focus being the exploration of avenues through which aspects of human biology can inform cognitive and affective aspects of organisational life, including ethical leadership.

