



The Wired Future of Humanity

I devoted my previous “Thinking about Science” column to recent claims that the Internet is seriously affecting our mental health. This time, I’m going to talk about claims that the Internet is going to be the future of our mental health! One such claim comes from *New York Times* writer Robert Wright (author of *The Evolution of God*). In a recent column (“Building One Big Brain,” July 6, 2010), Wright welcomes a forthcoming book by former executive editor of *Wired* magazine Kevin Kelly, titled *What Technology Wants*.

Wright begins by asking a fairly odd question: Is technology really about us? To which I respond, how can it *not* be about us, since we are both the creators and consumers of technology? What Wright means is that “technology is weaving humans into electronic webs that resemble big brains—corporations, online hobby groups, far-flung N.G.O.s. And I personally don’t think it’s outlandish to talk about us being, increasingly, neurons in a giant superorganism.”

Well, it may not seem outlandish to Wright, but does it make any sense? The superorganism metaphor is used by some biologists to indicate natural entities that are made of what we would normally consider individual organisms, yet they also act as a unit in some meaningful (and scientifically explorable) sense. Colonies of eusocial insects are the classic—though by no means only—example: the workers in an ant colony are organisms by any reasonable definition of the term, yet they sacrifice their own reproductive fitness for the benefit of the fitness of the queen. These kinds of situations were at one

point considered a serious challenge for Darwinian evolutionary theory, but they have been brilliantly accounted for by work (pioneered by British biologist W. D. Hamilton) that explores the unusual reproductive systems of these insects. It turns out that workers are more closely related to the queen’s offspring than they would be to their own—hence the evolution of their instinct to help the queen maximize her (and the colony’s) reproductive output.

Can human brains loosely connected to each other via Internet websites in any meaningful sense be thought of as cells in a superorganism, analogous to workers in an ant colony? If so, I haven’t encountered any articulate reason for it, other than the catchiness of the metaphor itself. But things get significantly worse from this shaky starting point.

Wright goes on to articulate the main reason he thinks the Internet-as-superorganism metaphor actually makes sense: “Could it be that, in some sense, the point of evolution—both the biological evolution that created an intelligent species and the technological evolution that a sufficiently intelligent species is bound to unleash—has been to create these social brains?” In a word: no. It couldn’t be, unless evolution were what philosophers call a teleological phenomenon: a process that actually aims at a particular goal to be achieved through mechanisms such as natural selection, mutation, etc. (I would note in passing that we also have no good reason to assume, based on a sample size of exactly one, that “sufficiently intelligent species” are “bound” to unleash technology. But that’s another story.)

Teleology immediately leads to the postulation of intelligent design, a possibility that—when we are talking about the laws of nature themselves—equally unavoidably means supernatural intelligent design, arguably the most antiscientific concept ever proposed. Wright realizes that what he calls “card-carrying Darwinians,” among which he includes himself, might have a problem with that. Indeed, he has debated both Daniel Dennett and Steven Pinker on this very topic. Yet he seems largely unperturbed by his arbitrary mishmash of naturalism and teleology. It’s not that teleology is impossible *a priori*, mind you, but it is such a profoundly un-naturalistic view that those who take it seriously ought to be prepared to mount a solid argument backed up by plenty of evidence. Extraordinary claims and all that, you know.

I bring up Wright’s bizarre views not because they are intrinsically interesting but rather because they are yet another example of an intellectual, articulate writer falling for a simplistic metaphor and running with it in the pages of the premier national newspaper. Skeptics have an easy time debunking the nonsense being thrown right and left in the media and populating the ever-expanding bookstore spaces devoted to spiritualism, religion, and “alternative” worldviews. It is much harder to account for why smart people engage in some serious mental gymnastics to deny the conclusion that there is no point to evolution. Neither we nor the Internet, and certainly not fantastically hypothetical human-Internet superbrains, are why the dinosaurs went extinct and Lucy started to walk on two limbs. There is no “why,” only the endlessly fascinating “how.”