*Aping Mankind* by Raymond Tallis

*An Absurd Being Review*

If one word serves to describe *Aping Mankind*, that word would be ‘thorough’. Tallis’ book takes the reader on a detailed and rigorous trek through the latest attempts in science to explain consciousness. He focuses on what he calls, “neuromania” (the idea that the mind and the brain are the same) and “Darwinitis” (the idea that we are nothing more than animals), and produced a ‘take-no-prisoners’ refutation of the various claims made by his twin nemeses.

This aspect tends to make the book a little negative in tone, as the author himself admits, and while *Aping Mankind* is almost entirely critical in nature, Tallis does go out of his way (and out on a limb) to put forward a positive theory regarding how consciousness could have arisen in a physical world (I won’t ruin the surprise here).

The reader may also find somewhat wearying Tallis’ pattern of presenting the opposition’s case and then demolishing it with an exhaustive list of problems or reasons why it just doesn’t work. Unfortunately, there is no way to be as thorough or as detailed as Tallis wants to be without courting this danger.

The crux of Tallis’ message is that although we are physical animals comprised of matter, we are also something much more than that. We straddle two worlds: the one a world of matter ruled by physical forces; the other a mental world we share with others like us, a *community of minds*, where facts *that* [such and such is the case], and ideas *about* [things], hold sway. The former trades in causality; the latter in consciousness.

Tallis argues that science, outrageously successful at describing the physical universe we have emerged from, has strayed from its path and is attempting to describe the human mind with tools that, while perfect for the job they were designed for, are woefully inadequate when it comes to dealing with consciousness. As a result, rather than accepting the natural limitations of their discipline, scientists have chosen to ignore consciousness, or worse, discount it is an illusion, and proceeded to go about mechanising humanity. This is evident in the absurd preponderance of neuro-prefixed disciplines that are sprouting up all over the place; things like neuro-aesthetics, neuro-economics, and so on; all of which Tallis gives a thorough (and thoroughly deserved) wringing out.

Naturally, Tallis also addresses topical issues such as freewill and the self, arguing that both are fundamental features of our humanity. The current failure of scientists to find them as they look ever deeper into the brain isn’t because they don’t exist; it’s because they don’t exist *in the brain*. Central to this discussion is the one Tallis raises regarding sufficient and necessary conditions; the physical brain being necessary, but not sufficient for consciousness.

And if you find yourself feeling any sympathy for those in the “Darwinitis” camp, Tallis points out how every single thing we do, right from composing sonnets and formulating scientific theories down to eating and defecating, is completely different from the way other animals do it. The problem is that we are too narrow in our focus, looking only at the mechanical act itself. When we consider that act in its broader context, we realise just how different the human *Lebenswelt* (Husserl’s term meaning ‘lifeworld’) is from the animal’s purely instinctual existence.

This idea, that our scientific purview is too narrow to accommodate consciousness, surfaces again and again in *Aping Mankind*. All of our actions are physical in nature but the mechanical movements that make up these actions are only the final step in a far more complex process that transcends our bodies. Stripping away this context, the thing that gives our acts meaning and significance, also strips away the very thing we are trying to find and explain; consciousness.

Some sections in *Aping Mankind* get a little dense, particularly when Tallis embarks on some more philosophical terrain, but no worthwhile book about consciousness could, or should, avoid this. And while most of the material is very accessible, some of the finer points require, and deserve, more than a single reading.

All in all, *Aping Mankind* is both timely and thought-provoking (two more words that aptly describe this book), and constitutes a much needed attempt to preserve our humanity, which we are, not losing, but rather steadily, deliberately and *scientifically* (although perhaps unknowingly) divesting ourselves of.