

Change Your Brain, Change Your Life:  
A Book Report

Joseph Fessenden  
PT 504 – Pastoral Counseling  
Paul Ceasar, Ed.D.  
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*Change Your Brain, Change Your Life* by Dr. Daniel G. Amen sets out to clarify and inform the lay reader of the physiological causes of various neuroses and psychoses commonly seen in the contemporary world; there is also an apparent marketing value for his clinics in the text, but the marketing aspect does not distract or detract from the information he provides about mental disorders. It seems most appropriate to offer the reasons he offers himself for using the SPECT scan and, by extension, for writing this book. Amen gives five reasons:

1. To make early intervention possible
2. To evaluate the patient accurately so that future illness can be prevented.
3. To help the physician elicit understanding and compassion from the patient's family.
4. To differentiate between two problems with similar symptoms.
5. To discern when a problem is the result of abuse and remove the patient from a dangerous environment.<sup>1</sup>

Amen has written this text to introduce the general public to the SPECT (Single Photon Emission Computerized Tomography) scan, the nuclear medicine scanner that he now uses in his own practice. This device is able to, with the help of a radioactive substance introduced into the patient's bloodstream, identify the blood flow, and thereby activity level, of different areas inside the brain. This makes it possible for the doctor, patient, and family to visualize the specific physiological issue underlying the behavioral or emotional issue that is presenting itself in a person's life.

Throughout the main body of the book, Amen spends two chapters on each disorder. In each case, Amen follows a similar structure. First, he identifies the brain area that is the subject of the section, shows its location in the brain and identifies its function in the human body and common issues caused by its malfunction. Amen then provides one or more case studies of patients who have been treated in his clinics along with images of their own SPECT scans and

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel G. Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness*, pbk. ed. (New York: Times Books, [2000?]), 43-58. This quote is the list of headings, each of which is discussed further by Amen on these pages.

treatment scenarios and results. The second chapter of each section offers some non-pharmaceutical interventions that may help persons to address issues without resorting to medication. He does clearly maintain, however, that medication is sometimes necessary, either temporarily or permanently, to restore proper brain function. Finally, Amen provides a short self-check checklist for the reader to check himself for symptoms of one of these disorders.

These are the areas of the brain and common challenges that Amen discusses in the body of his text. He first focuses on the deep limbic system, the malfunction of which is the main cause of clinical depression. This seems a particularly appropriate place to start because of the prevalence of depression in contemporary society. He next delves into anxiety and fear, which are frequently coupled with depressive disorders; these symptoms frequently arise from problems in the basal ganglia. After that, Amen shifts to the prefrontal cortex to discuss inattention and impulsivity, again a frequent challenge in modern American society. He then discusses challenges faced by those stuck in worry and obsessiveness from a malfunctioning cingulate system. After that, he delves into anger and memory problems caused by malfunctions in the temporal lobes. Finally, Amen spends the final several chapters in his book discussing emotional challenges and social problems from the more spread areas of the brain. These include discussions of violence, damage done by drugs and alcohol to the physiology of the brain, and somatic barriers to intimacy. He concludes his book with some philosophical questions and guidelines to direct readers to professional care when appropriate.

My reaction to Amen's book was overall positive. He provides insight to the brain to explain many of the most common ailments that affect people in the contemporary world. If this text were broadly read, we could expect some of the stigma that continues to haunt mental health problems to decline and disappear. This reflection on the physiological underpinnings of these

are necessary because, in the contemporary world, there remains an abundance of well-intentioned but ignorant advice given to those with mental problems ranging from “just act differently” to “it’s all in your head” and even claims like those espoused to a wide audience a few years ago by Tom Cruise rejecting the entire science of psychology as imaginary. This advice is not only unhelpful, but it is actually dangerous to the people who receive it because it can lead to a person refusing or avoiding appropriate medical attention to treat a physiological mental health issue. It should be noted, however, that there is an argument to be made for contemporary overuse of medication to treat perceived psychological issues. For example, millions of children are treated with medication for Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in the United States today. Of these, it is likely that many of them simply need to learn some level of self-control rather than rely on medication for an easy fix. However, overuse of medication is no excuse to reject its appropriate use.

In my estimation, Amen was thorough in his detail and research. His conclusions based on the readings from his SPECT scans and case studies seemed appropriate. His non-pharmaceutical interventions offered in each section were well explained and realistic; he also offered a good balance between seeking behavioral solutions and resorting to medication. My only fear in Amen’s presentation lies with the checklists that are offered at the end of each section. Such simplified checklists are useful tools in the right hands, but, for some, they will lead to wide self-diagnosis of non-existent ailments. While most of Amen’s prescriptions without pharmaceutical intervention are just good mental hygiene, it seems that a person could cause some of these conditions if it is not already there merely by the concern that he may already have that condition. Amen did not make the point clear enough that the checklists are far from

conclusive and are in no way a replacement for a professional evaluation if a person feels that he suffers from one of the conditions in question.

Theologically, Amen's work is basically agnostic. He does not have any significant theological content or direction, but he also does not exclude it. Rather, for the vast majority of the book, Amen is making medical claims rather than theological or philosophical claims. The greatest exception to this is his chapter on the nature of the human person near the end of the book, "Who Is Andrew Really? Questions About the Essence of Our Humanity."<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, Amen reflects on questions about the human person that his research has raised in his own reflection. He does ask the provocative question of what effect our brain chemistry and physiology may have on our understanding of and relationship with God. I do find his answer to this question satisfying and acceptable to the Catholic theological tradition. That is, if our brain is working properly, we are more likely to understand God as he is; if our brain has an overactive deep limbic system that processes each and every experience through a negative lens, we are more likely to perceive God and relate to him in a negative and authoritarian manner. He also questions whether we defy God based on our training and environment or whether such behavior stems from a malfunctioning brain. Again, Amen points to the brain function as involved but probably not determinate.

In one aspect, however, I believe Amen falls short theologically and philosophically in the Catholic tradition; Amen treats the human person in a largely materialistic manner. True, he observes that we are not just "a collection of neurons, neurotransmitters, and hormones," but rather "our personality is intimately connected to brain function, but as we have seen, brain function is also intimately connected to our thoughts and environment. They work in a circle and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 549.

cannot be separated.”<sup>3</sup> While Amen’s mention of “thoughts” in this list could be interpreted to point to that part of man which is wholly immaterial, that is, the intellect, in philosophical terms, I would have preferred to see some explicit mention that man is more than brain chemistry or environmental factors, even more than a vague reference to “thoughts.” Even here, however, it is imperative to remember that, as a medical doctor, he is not qualified to delve into such questions, so his reticence to throw his support to any side of this discussion explicitly is understandable.

Pastorally, this text seems immeasurably valuable. Nearly every aspect of Amen’s approach could serve to assist a priest in his pastoral duties. First of all, a general understanding of Amen’s approach and the brain functions in question will help a priest to discern what the appropriate level of assistance for a person coming for assistance might be. I would argue that those areas of support can broadly be divided into four categories. First, a person could be served through spiritual direction and assistance, that is, a wholly spiritual approach. Second, a person approaching a pastoral minister may require some additional counseling that can be offered by that pastoral minister personally; such assistance would include some level of counseling and understanding of the psychology of the situation as well as spiritual guidance. For any psychological work beyond the simplest, however, a person should be referred to a professional counselor, therapist, or psychologist; such a referral would represent the third category. Finally, a person seeking assistance may require psychiatric assistance and pharmaceutical intervention. Again, such intervention is in no way a failure of the person or other forms of assistance offered in the first three categories, but rather an understanding that the brain, like any other organ of the human body, sometimes requires medicine to correct a malfunction. A solid understanding of Amen’s offerings can help a priest to discern which type of help a person might require and if he is personally ill-equipped to offer the necessary assistance.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 553.

Amen's third reason for using SPECT scans suggests another great pastoral advantage to this text. Family members and friends of persons with mental problems often end up frustrated and impatient with those family members and friends because they do not understand that their expectation that the person should be able to just correct his behavior is unreasonable. Amen's book offers an accessible and insightful dive into what is causing such behaviors and can allow family members and friends to understand that such behavior is often outside the control of the person himself.

There are two significant limitations in the pastoral application of this text, both of which have been briefly mentioned. First of all, it must be noted that the text in itself does not qualify a pastoral minister to make confident assertions and diagnoses for a person approaching him for assistance. These are, at best, rough guides to behaviors that frequently accompany such challenges, and actual diagnoses must always come from a qualified mental health professional. Second, Amen ignores the spiritual component of healing. As noted above, this is not unreasonable since Amen is a medical doctor and writing as a doctor. In that capacity, he is not qualified to make spiritual or philosophical assertions. Therefore, it falls to the priest or counselor to assist those who approach him to properly integrate spirituality and prayer into each person's path to healing of mental or emotional challenges.

Hence, Amen's book is excellent as far as it goes. He provides insight for the layperson into the physiological function of the brain and the problems that can arise when the brain has a physical or chemical problem. He offers suggestions of solutions that may be effective to combat these challenges and correct brain function without the use of medication, and he encourages medication when it is appropriate. With an understanding of the content provided in Amen's book and filtered through a proper anthropology as taught by the Church, a priest can better

guide the people entrusted to him to seek appropriate help for the emotional and minor psychological challenges they face in life.