

are virtually limitless—the developing “arsenal of techniques for physical, chemical, and potentially genetic control” is destined to “shake the foundations of social thought.”

So far, the debate over brain policy has focused largely on violence and addiction. If some brain defects predispose people to violence or drug addiction, how can we blame them for doing what, in effect, comes naturally? Blank believes that acknowledging the influence of genes and biochemistry does not “force us to abandon the notion of a free will, although it does require a refinement of it.” With few exceptions, individuals still must bear responsibility for their actions, because “brain damage or abnormality remains subjective and links to any specific behavior are tenuous at best.”

Conceivably, though, future discoveries may strengthen the chain of causality between brain defects and aberrant behavior. Neurochemical determinism could collide with much more than just our criminal code. “Biological models of behavior . . . will always be controversial in Western societies,” Blank points out, for they “challenge the foundational concepts of democracy: equality, individual freedom, and free will.”

As if understanding misbehavior weren't contentious enough, scientists are seeking refined methods for altering it. Some of these techniques already are with us: children on Ritalin, adults on antidepressants and mood stabilizers, the elderly on drugs aimed at enhancing mental performance, the anxious of all ages on tranquilizers. In the near future, increasing numbers of us will be taking drugs to enhance memory, sociability, and virility (Viagra is just the first).

Blank favors greater regulation to cope with the emerging psychotechnologies. He envisions legislation requiring “health-outcomes impact statements” for new brain-related technologies, and giving “health-outcomes boards” the authority to decide whether social benefits exceed the costs. He acknowledges, though, that this sort of central planning clashes with our emphasis on individual rights over collective interests. Still, such boards are perfectly consistent with recent shifts of power and responsibility in the field from scientists and medical practitioners to entrepreneurs and bureaucrats.

Americans, Blank argues convincingly, don't yet appreciate the enormous potential of neuroscience—or its likely social and political impacts. That can be explained in part by the news media's fascination with the new genetic technologies and a few other scientific fields. Neuroscience hasn't yet come up with a Dolly. But, as the author makes clear, brain modification—even more than genetic engineering—will profoundly influence our lives in the decades to come.

—Richard Restak

FOR THE TIME BEING.

By Annie Dillard. Knopf. 205 pp. \$22

Author of the Pulitzer-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Dillard muses on those expanses of space and time that, in John Updike's words, “conspire to crush the humans.” Drawing on Eastern and Western thought, the intricacies of the natural world, and the beliefs of 18th-century rabbi Baal Shem Tov and French paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, she contemplates the insignificance of an individual life when weighed against the age of the universe and “the whole vast anonymous army of living humanity.”

Dillard probes our perceptions, misperceptions, and blind spots. Why, she wonders, does she find it easy to fire up moral urgency over a girl lost in a Connecticut forest, but difficult even to comprehend the death of 138,000 Bengalis in a flood (her daughter suggests “lots and lots of dots, in blue water”)? “Individuals blur,” Dillard writes. “Journalists use the term ‘compassion fatigue.’ What Ernst Becker called the denial of death is a kind of reality fatigue.”

“Excavating the Combe Grenal cave in France, paleontologists found 60 different levels of human occupation.” Disquieting as it may be to contemplate a faraway future in which we will be just one more layer, Dillard takes some reassurance from the faraway past. Today's gloomsayers, pronouncing civilization's imminent decline, have a great many forebears. “Already in the first century thinkers thought the world was shot to hell.” And Augustine, looking back on the apostles, lamented, “Those were last days then; how much more so now!”

—Paul Feigenbaum