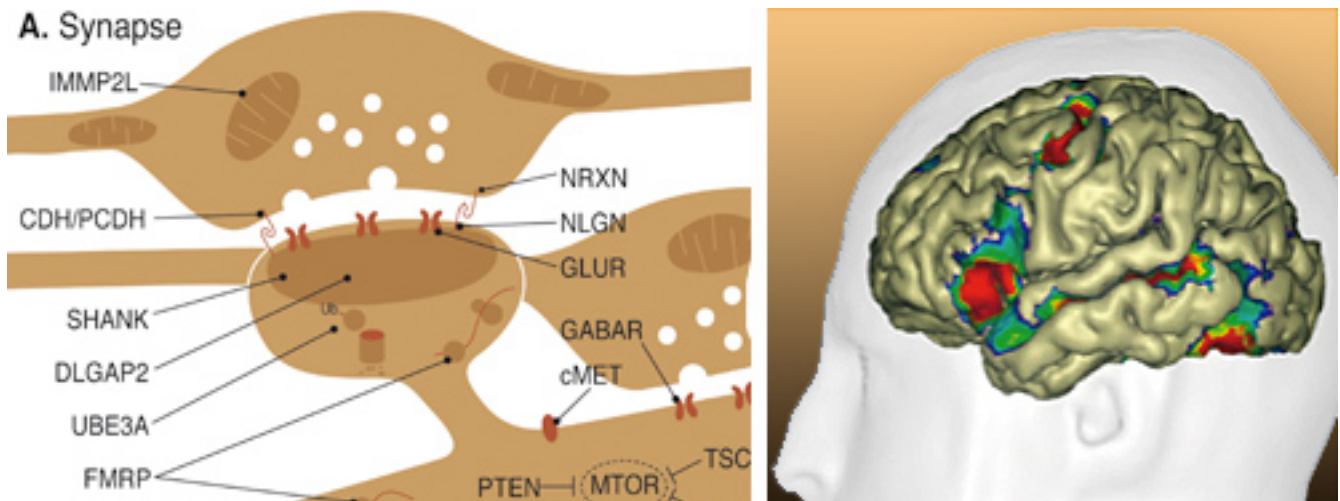




Neurosciences and the Human Person: New Perspectives on Human Activities

Working Group



Each generation of neuroscientists, philosophers and theologians has the task of analyzing and assessing new advances in the understanding of the human person, dignity and value within nature.

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences acknowledged this responsibility through two important workshops which should be seen as milestones.

The first was held in 1964 and was on 'The Brain and Conscious Experience' (Study Week, 28 Sept.-3 Oct. 1964, SV 30. Chairman: John C. Eccles; edited by Pietro Salviucci).

The second was held in 1988 and was on 'Brain Research and the Mind-Body Problem. Epistemological and Metaphysical Issues' (5 Oct. 1988, SV 79. Round Table Discussion. Chairman: Carlos Chagas; edited by Giuseppe del Re).

In 1964 the President of the Academy was George Lemaître and the Chancellor was Pietro Salviucci. There were 24 participants, including the Academicians John Eccles, Corneille Heymans, Giuseppe Moruzzi and Roger Sperry. Among the invited scientists there were Edgar Lord Adrian, O. Creutzfeldt, Ragnar Granit, Hebert Jasper, Benjamin Libet, Vernon Mountcastle and Hans-Lukas Teuber.

In 1988 the President was Carlos Chagas and the Chancellor was Enrico di Rovasenda. There were 22 participants. The theologians were Enrico di Rovasenda, Jean Shotte, and Giovanni Marchesi and the philosophers were Giuseppe del Re, Vittorio Mathieu, Peter Henrici, Paolo A. Rossi and Francesco Calvo. Among the scientists were the Academicians John C. Eccles, Jérôme Lejeune and János Szentagothai. This Round Table was preceded by a Study Week Session on

the 'Principles of Design and Operation of the Brain' which had a long list of distinguished participants.

Continuing this important lineage of research and reflection, it is thus appropriate to gather for another meeting at the end of this year to continue the dialogue of the current generation between neuroscientists, philosophers and theologians in this scientific age. Significantly, this workshop on 'Neurosciences and the Human Person: New Perspectives on Human Activities' comes after another 24 years, the lifetime of a generation and the same time span that separated the first two meetings of the Academy.

Neuroscientists have made fundamental improvements since the last meeting in 1988 with the introduction of advanced neurobiological and genetic technologies – and a corresponding new language – which deserve analysis in order to have a better understanding of the status of the human being that is in line with these new scientific discoveries. Philosophers and theologians, in their turn, are increasingly aware of the particular discoveries, epistemologies and languages that science has developed and try to interpret this new significant data in the light of the Socratic principle 'know yourself'. It follows that man's knowledge is not derived from a single perspective – that of external observation, explanation, and experimentation: this knowledge develops in the interface between the observation of nature and reflective understanding. The human being is an observable entity, like all organisms but at the same time it reflects on itself, it is a 'self-interpreting being'. Thus, understanding the human condition requires analysis of the various levels of knowledge and descriptions involving reconciliation between insights derived from the first, second and third person perspective in this age of rapid scientific progress. We hope that this dialogue between the different approaches and languages, which we propose for these three days, will enrich the contemporary understanding of the human person.

We may imagine another meeting of our Academy on this same issue in 2036 but we certainly cannot predict the topics and the technologies that will be discussed then. Our fields are expanding rapidly and the scientific, philosophical and theological challenges will increase accordingly.

We sincerely thank all the participants for their valuable contribution.

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