

Ng Chin San - Changing the Human Brain

The road below was scattered with litter, broken beer bottles and picket signs the only evidence left of the chaos that was the previous evening. The Scientist stood motionless at the window surveying the dark scene, taking a sip from a glass of whiskey in his hand from time to time as Beethoven's piano sonata in G minor played softly in the background. In the distance on the sidewalk he could barely make out the silhouette of a street cleaner, bottle in hand, slumped over the curb, his thin broom visibly buckling under the pressure of his weight. He shifted his gaze to the east, absorbing the warm amber glow on the horizon that heralded the beginning of yet another day.

So much had happened in the past ten years. Too much. He was convinced he was doing the right thing, but after all, what does he know of right and wrong? He was a scientist, used to the safe haven of quantitative and empirical certainty, plunged into a different world of grey areas and conjecture, one that he was unfamiliar with. All he wanted was to follow in the footsteps of the great scientific minds, to tear the mask off nature and stare at the face of God, or was that too much to ask?

He fidgeted uneasily in his suit. It was not so much nervousness as the simple fact that he had always felt more comfortable in less formal clothes.

“Does it not fit? Jesus, how much weight could you have put on since we got that made?”

He turned back to face the room. Slouched on the leather sofa beside the only lit lamp in the room was a middle-aged man, dressed in the same suit that he was, cheekily grinning up at him.

“Funny, with all the stress you were going through I’d have thought you’d lose instead of gain some.”

The Scientist smiled appreciatively at his companion’s attempt to lighten the mood. He was not always this austere, the scientist. He fondly recalled the surge of euphoria when he first made the discovery. At long last he knew how Archimedes felt when he solved his problem, and Edison once he succeeded after failing over and over again. It was the very reason he became a scientist in the first place. He had reached the Holy Grail: unlocking the secrets of the human brain. More specifically, he pioneered a treatment for Alzheimer’s disease grounded on genetic engineering with an extremely high success rate.

The bliss of this breakthrough was short-lived as reality rapidly set in. Despite scepticism expressed by various factions of the scientific community, his work was already being utilized and developed upon across the globe. Debates raged over the morality, legality, and indeed,

legitimacy of his research, further dividing countries and the world. In the race to uncover the rest of the brain's secrets, in particular with the objective of genetically engineered cognitive enhancement, scientists defected to countries with lower human rights standards and favourable laws to conduct their research, using his initial discovery as a platform and template. Thousands of people volunteered as test subjects for their experiments in the hope of gaining a head start in life's rat race, but very few, if any, survived without severe permanent injury. The scientists were simply out of their depth. Even with the breakthrough, they were gambling against the house, Mother Nature. It did not take long for these scientific debacles to reach the mainstream, and in a matter of weeks, global movements against genetic research had emerged. Violent protests and campaigns for the removal of private and public funding of genetic research, coupled with lobbying organisations pushing for legislative reform, were just part of the picture of the growing unrest surrounding this issue.

The Scientist scanned the room. It was a study, with wooden bookshelves filled with dusty volumes and various to-scale anatomical models of brains of different species flanking the door opposite the window. To his left, above the rich wood mantelpiece of a fireplace hung a three elegant portraits of Francis Crick, James Watson and Maurice Wilkins, the discoverers of the structure of DNA. His gaze lingered over

the portraits, and then skipped across the room to the crucifix on the right.

“That’s some illustrious company you got there,” his companion said, observing the Scientist intently. “Though I highly doubt Crick, Watson and Wilkins ever got hate mail. You going to read any of them anytime soon?” He gestured towards the two piles of letters stacked neatly on the expansive mahogany desk.

“It’s just the one pile. The other is in support of my research. There’s more in my email junk folder if you’re interested. And to answer your question, no. Why bother? I’m not going to remember half of them anyway,” the Scientist chuckled.

His companion became silent.

Sensing the unease his words might have triggered, the Scientist asserted, “I’m doing the right thing.” The forcefulness with which he said it surprised him, so much so that he wondered in retrospect if those words were meant more for his own benefit than his companion’s.

“I never denied that. We do not know enough. It’s as simple as that. But you know you don’t have to—“

“I know.”

His companion stood up from the sofa and wandered around the room restlessly, scrutinizing the memorabilia and photos displayed on the shelves. The Scientist glanced out the window. The sun was now distinctly visible over the horizon. It was almost time.

Ever since the publication of his ground-breaking research, he had retreated from the public eye, ignoring and declining all requests for interviews and appointments. He was a scientist, not a politician, and was caught unawares by the backlash and uproar that ensued. Now he had an opportunity to set things right. He would publicly announce his stance against all practical use or application of genetic engineering at the ceremony, and the flaws with his research, which merely brushed the tip of the iceberg. He was fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the face of God, but it made him all the more aware of the foolishness and futility of any attempt to challenge and indeed, as some of his colleagues had endeavoured, to play God himself. It was about time he grew a pair, picked a side and helped put an end to this madness, a side chosen by his fundamental moral beliefs. He chuckled to himself at the irony of the situation, and his prior naivety that led him to believe that science and religion, or any qualitative belief for that matter, were mutually exclusive domains.

“Remember when we were kids, we used to play Hamlet?” asked his companion, still facing the bookshelves.

“I remember.”

He turned around to face the Scientist, his expression contorted into an exaggerated, almost comical look of sincerity, holding out in front of him one of the Scientist’s anatomical models of the human brain.

“Alas, poor Yorick,” he whispered, the model brain still perched precariously upon his outstretched hand. “A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.”

“Well I’ve definitely had your back more than a thousand times, don’t you forget that,” the Scientist replied. He could not help but smile at the gesture, despite its sober undertone.

Two distant but distinct blasts of a car horn interrupted their friendly banter.

“It’s time, don’t forget your coat. Stockholm is chilly this time of the year.”

“Don’t forget your pills,” countered his companion playfully, holding out a small box.

“You know they don’t help much.”

“I know. It doesn’t have to. Just has to help you remember to repay the money you owe me from that bet you lost.”

The Scientist laughed and took the box, ushering his companion out the door ahead of him.

Ng Chin San is a third year law student at UCL. He enjoys playing sports. He also enjoys sleeping.