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Sunday Book Review

David Brooks's Theory of Human Nature

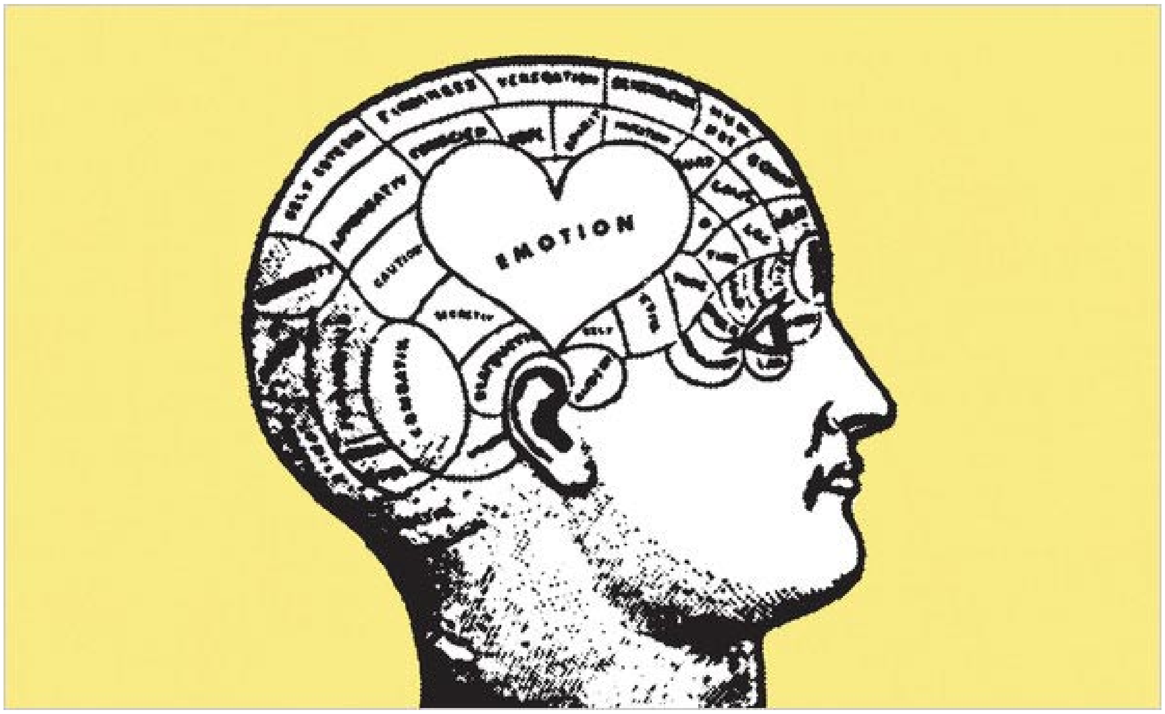

Illustration by Oliver Munday

By THOMAS NAGEL
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Readers of his Op-Ed column in The New York Times know that David Brooks is an aficionado of research in the social sciences, especially psychology, and that he believes it has great practical importance. Now he has written a book, "The Social Animal," in order to assemble the evidence for a certain conception of the human mind, the wellsprings of action and the causes of success and failure in life, and to draw implications for social policy. The book is really a moral and social tract, but Brooks has hung it on the life stories of two imaginary people, Harold and Erica, who are used to illustrate his theory in detail and to provide the occasion for countless references to the psychological literature and frequent disquisitions on human nature and society.

This device is supposed to relieve the tedium of what would otherwise be like skimming through 10 years' worth of the Tuesday Science Times.But fiction is not Brooks's métier, and he lacks the ability to create characters that compel belief. The story of Harold and Erica, their formative years, eventual meeting, marriage and separate careers, is without interest: one doesn't care what happens to them because in spite of Brooks's earnest attempt to describe their psychological depths, they do not come to life; they and their supporting cast are mannequins for the display of psychological and social generalizations.

Harold is the imaginative and socially attuned child of middle-class parents, not terribly ambitious, but eventually successful as a writer and social commentator. (He notices that there is a New York Times columnist whose views are "remarkably similar to his own.") Erica is the tough and competitive daughter of socially marginal, unmarried parents, mother Chinese, father Mexican, who propels herself upward, and after a stellar business career becomes a high official in a Democratic presidential administration and eventually a regular at Davos. An original touch is that every stage of their long lives, from birth to death, is set "in the current moment, the early 21st century, because I want to describe different features of the way we live now."

Erica commits adultery once, and is overcome by shame, which provides a handle for theories of moral psychology. Harold's infant relations with his mother are used to illustrate theories of innateness and mental development; and so on. But the meat of the book is in its general claims about human nature and society.

The main idea is that there are two levels of the mind, one unconscious and the other conscious, and that the first is much more important than the second in determining what we do. It must be said immediately that Brooks has a terminological problem here. He describes the contents of the unconscious mind as "emotions, intuitions, biases, longings, genetic predispositions, character traits and social norms," and later he includes "sensations, perceptions, drives and needs." A majority of the things on this list are "conscious," in the usual sense of the word, since they are parts of conscious experience. The sense in which they are unconscious, which is what Brooks has in mind, is that they are not under direct conscious control. I may consciously choose from a menu, but I do not consciously choose what foods to like.

It is obvious, without the need for scientific research, that vastly more of the work of the human mind is unconscious or automatic in this sense than conscious and deliberate. We do not consciously construct a visual image from sensory input or consciously choose the word order and produce the muscle movements to utter a sentence, any more than we consciously digest our food. The huge submerged bulk of the mental iceberg, with its stores of memory and acquired skills that have become automatic, like language, driving and etiquette, supplies people with the raw materials on which they can exercise their reason and decide what to think and what to do.

The main problem that Brooks addresses in this book is how to understand the relation between these two mental domains. His aim is to “counteract a bias in our culture. The conscious mind writes the autobiography of our species. Unaware of what is going on deep down inside, the conscious mind assigns itself the starring role. It gives itself credit for performing all sorts of tasks it doesn’t really control.”

We may think that what we believe and do is largely under our conscious control, and we may believe that we should try to increase this control by the conscious exercise of reasoning and will power, but Brooks says that this is all wrong. Nondeliberate emotion, perception and intuition are much more important in shaping our lives than reason and will. Knowledge of what makes us tick, Brooks argues, does not come primarily from introspection but must rely on systematic external observation, experiment and statistics.

What is more, the Platonic ideal of putting the passions under the control of reason leads to policy mistakes, because rational incentives and arguments cannot change the most deep-seated sources of failure; only pervasive social influences that affect the unconscious operation of the mind can do that. The practical consequences Brooks would draw are suggested by the policy failures he identifies: he would protect old neighborhoods from urban renewal in order to support local networks of friendship and community; oppose welfare programs that reduce the traditional pressure to avoid out-of-wedlock births; and try to offer a substitute form of engagement when the parental culture does not encourage education. (Erica escapes poverty by forcing herself into a school that surrounds her with a comprehensive culture of discipline.) “Emotion assigns value to things,” Brooks writes, “and reason can only make choices on the basis of those valuations.” The deeper level of the mind also holds a great store of information, coming from genetics, culture, family and education. “Our thoughts are profoundly molded by this long historic flow, and none of us exists, self-made, in isolation from it.”

As Brooks observes, these ideas are not new: the importance and legitimacy of sentiment and social influence in determining human conduct was emphasized by figures of the British Enlightenment, notably David Hume, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. Hume denied the dominance of reason, though he also offered brilliant analyses of the complex and systematic ways in which our sentiments, or passions, operate. So what has been added by recent cognitive science? Most significant, according to Brooks, is the accumulating evidence of the many specific ways that our lives and conduct are less under our conscious control than we think.

Brooks seems willing to take seriously any claim by a cognitive scientist, however idiotic: for example, that since people need only 4,000 words for 98 percent of conversations, the reason they have vocabularies of 60,000 words is to impress and sort out potential mates. But some findings are significant.

Take priming. If you tell people to write down the first three digits of their phone number and then ask them to guess the date of Genghis Khan’s death, they will be more likely to put it in the first millennium, with a three-digit year, than those who are asked without the preliminary. Or framing. If a surgeon tells his patients that a procedure has a 15 percent failure rate, they are likely to decide against it; if he tells them the procedure has an 85 percent success rate, they tend to choose it. Such effects have long been familiar to salesmen and advertisers, but lately they have been studied experimentally. In addition, statistics indicate that the effect of early environment and innate dispositions on later functioning is very marked.

Some groups are far better than others at inculcating functional norms and social skills. Children from disorganized, unstable communities have a much harder time acquiring the discipline to succeed in life. And a famous experiment conducted around 1970 demonstrated that the ability of 4-year-olds to postpone gratification by leaving a marshmallow uneaten for a time as a condition of receiving a second marshmallow was a very good predictor of success in life: “The kids who could wait a full 15 minutes had, 13 years later, SAT scores that were 210 points higher than the kids who could wait only 30 seconds. . . . Twenty years later, they had much higher college-completion rates, and 30 years later, they had much higher incomes. The kids who could not wait at all had much higher incarceration rates. They were much more likely to suffer from drug- and alcohol-addiction problems.”

Similarly, in morality and politics. “The adult personality — including political views — is forever defined in opposition to one’s natural enemies in high school,” Brooks writes. His analysis of what he calls the “underdebates” in American politics — the web of associations and sympathies that divide Republicans and Democrats — is plausible, if familiar: snowmobiles versus bicycles, religious versus secular morality, and so forth.

Still, even if empirical methods enable us to understand subrational processes better, the crucial question is, How are we to use this kind of self-understanding? Brooks emphasizes the ways in which it can improve our prediction and control of what people will do, but I am asking something different. When we discover an unacknowledged influence on our conduct, what should be our critical response? About this question Brooks has essentially nothing to say. He gives lip-service to the idea that moral sentiments are subject to conscious review and improvement, and that reason has a role to play, but when he tries to explain what this means, he is reduced to a fashionable bromide about choosing the narrative we tell about our lives, “the narrative we will use to organize perceptions.”

On what grounds are we supposed to “choose a narrative?” Experiments show that human beings feel greater sympathy for those who resemble them — racially, for example — than for those who do not. How do we know that it would be better to counter the effects of this bias rather than to respect it as a legitimate form of loyalty? The most plausible ground is the conscious and rational one that race is irrelevant to the badness of someone’s suffering, so these differential feelings, however natural, are a poor guide to how we should treat people. But reason is not Brooks’s thing: he prefers to quote a little Sunday school hymn about how Jesus loves the little children, “Be they yellow, black or white / they are precious in his sight.” This is an easy case, but harder ones also demand more reflection than he has time for.

Brooks is right to insist that emotional ties, social interaction and the communal transmission of norms are essential in forming individuals for a decent life, and that habit, perception and instinct form a large part of the individual character. But there is moral and intellectual laziness in his sentimental devaluation of conscious reasoning, which is what we have to rely on when our emotions or our inherited norms give unclear or poorly grounded instructions.

Life, morality and politics are not science, but their improvement requires thought — not only thought about the most effective means of shaping people, which is Brooks’s concern, but thought about what our ends should be. Such questions don’t appeal to him, since they cannot be settled by empirical evidence of the kind he feels comfortable with. Brooks is out to expose the superficiality of an overly rational view of human nature, but there is more than one kind of superficiality.