

Complex Human Mind – The Implications for Civilized Society

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This essay is motivated in part after reading Leonard Mlodinow's Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior, 2012.

We carve out several layers of the human mind along with their functions and what we know of their primary activity regions in the brain. We make a huge mistake if we take the heuristic categories that emerge in this process as “the way things are.” It is only because all of these layers/functions are more or less fully integrated that we can operate successfully as individual humans. Clearly our categories are NOT distinct and they do not capture reality. Like all language, the names we give to phenomena are an artificial abstraction from the real world – a convenience that facilitates communication. When science takes these names/categories too seriously, we restrict access to our understanding. We cannot avoid the problem; but we can be aware of it!

As humans in modern western society, we are focused on the material world as objective reality and the conscious mind with reason, rationality, and the intellect as the primary zone of mental operation that we emphasize. But with this focus, we vastly overrate the role of the conscious mind in our individual, social and environmental behavior. The assumptions we make as a result of this more or less exclusive focus can get us in deep trouble – especially when it comes to our expectations about being able to manage complex, civilized societies – singly and even more so at the global level.

Categories of Mind/Mentation

The generally recognized categories of the human mind – all dependent upon underlying bio-chemical processes in the physical structures of the brain – are:

The Perceptual/Sensory System – All the ways in which we receive input/data from the “outside” world; “outside” understood by most of us as being limited to the objective world. Therefore the five senses – no “extra” sensory perception!

The Autonomic Nervous System – All the primal internal processes/mechanisms – of which we are mostly unaware – for maintaining proper relations and functions in and among the various bodily organs and systems. This includes the vast internal sensory and regulatory domain. Example: the “Gut Brain.”

Memory/Recall – What perceptual, experiential, social and environmental information is stored and available for recall at the conscious level. Given our cultural focus on consciousness, the data stored at the unconscious level is mostly disregarded in spite of the evidence for its huge influence on our concept of self, our memory, our perceptions, our feelings and our social behavior.

The Unconscious Mind – The relatively “vague” zone where all retained internal and external data is filtered, associated with emotional charge, and delivered to guide the behavioral sphere with little or no conscious awareness. There are crossover areas between unconscious functions and conscious functions in what is most likely better characterized as a continuum. Habit/routine and dream/daydream along with access through intuitive mental processes to the subjective realm of self and reality in the form of insight/inspiration/psychic phenomena are some of these crossover manifestations. The unconscious “zone” of mind “matures” to control much of human “awareness” and behavior after most of the perceptual and autonomic areas develop and in the main before the conscious dimension of mind emerges and develops.

The Conscious Mind – This is the mental zone over which we believe that we are fully aware and that we exercise independent control in the form of our thoughts and behavior. This is the celebrated region of intellect, reason, logical thought, critical thinking – which in turn support the scientific process. The stunning conjoined technological and societal progress – as evidenced in the development of modern complex civilized society – is the basis for the high regard we place on the conscious mind, reason, and the scientific process. The last of the mental “zones” to arise, we tend to “see” all the rest of mind in terms of the perspective it provides. This is very likely a huge mistake!

Feelings/Emotions – The charge on a continuum from very positive to intensely negative assigned to or associated with information and experience at all levels. We tend to attribute these feelings and emotions to what we are aware of at the conscious level, but the instinctual and unconscious are major players in determining both our awareness of these feelings and emotions and the way these feelings and emotions are manifested/expressed.

Conscience and Consciousness – The meta level of our conscious awareness: the self awareness of our conscious processes and the ability to judge for ourselves and in others whether our mental and social behavior is productive and/or appropriate.

A work like Subliminal is important in highlighting the fact that the human conscious mind and consciousness arrive very late in the evolutionary process and sit “atop” the bulk of the mental capability that led to our survival as one of the late primate species. Consciousness is just the last stage in the evolution of the mind of modern humans. It correlates with the expansion of the prefrontal cortex and especially of the neocortex. It is this development that is associated with the origination of full symbolic language and the ability to manage social relations at larger group scales – key underpinnings for complex society.

As a social scientist, it is particularly interesting to note the relation of the development of the size of the neocortex to social group size among primates. A smaller volume neocortex correlates with a group size of about 12 which is prevalent among grooming cliques of monkeys. An intermediate size/volume neocortex is in evidence among apes with group sizes of 20-30. The largest neocortex size/volume occurs in modern humans and corresponds to group sizes of about 150 members. This is an especially revealing number since it is about the average size of a small traditional aboriginal tribe. Interestingly, this 150 number, also corresponds to the number of family members and close friends in the networks of many individuals in complex societies. So, this social set persists into the modern context where we live in cities, states and nations of millions of people. Why? The key is the nature of these relationships. They are what are known as personal relations rather than impersonal relations, which are characteristic of most social relations in complex societies. These personal relations are based on knowing the individuals in the network “in the round” – in many different roles and historically over time. In short, we know these individuals intimately. These are individuals that in general we can trust, that we can depend upon, who depend upon us in multiple ways, and with whom we can and often do cooperate. This is the fundamental set of full social cooperation.

On the social continuum from these 100-150 intimate relations to more distant friends to acquaintances to fellow citizens to foreigners to outright strangers to enemies, we see the ties between individuals and groups slowly weaken and disappear. And with this dissolution, our orientation to cooperate shrinks and our caution level and competitive stance rises. Importantly, this situation is not just a function of culture. Distinguishing between familiars and strangers is permanently built in from infancy at the unconscious level. As adults, about 150 is the maximum number of individuals that exist in our social networks that fall into the highly familiar and very cooperative realm. When we exceed this coterie of “personal” relations and pass into the realm of impersonal relations, we are pressing the number of relations for which we are built to accommodate.

Humans have lived in bands and tribes where social relations are mostly personal and more or less fully cooperative for 96% of their history. This is the condition for which humans have evolved as reflected in the development of the volume of the neocortex of the human brain. Yes, traditionally humans can and do develop relations in larger groups – to larger tribes of 600+ and tribal federations of 2-3,000, but full cooperation becomes periodic and more tenuous in these larger group relations. This is the societal set up for which humans are tuned by evolution, and it corresponds to the boundary of personal relations.

So, what happens in modern complex, civilized society, which has only been around for most humans for the last 2-3,000 years – no time at all from the evolutionary perspective? In some stable village settings, where the numbers are more “manageable” and resemble that of a tribe, individuals may relate on a more familiar basis. But in the cities, states and nations of multiple millions of people – to which we supposedly “belong,” social relations are among individuals who are mostly strangers to one another, but who tolerate one another as “fellow citizens.” We form most other social relations in complex society along some singular strand – as a doctor, a store clerk, a mechanic, a customer, a teacher, etc. And to the extent we are socially oriented, we may develop 2-400 additional relationships where we know these individuals in two or three respects as acquaintances and colleagues.

We are humans living within the vast, impersonal social relations of modern complex society, while we remain genetically/physiologically/mentally tuned to live most successfully in bands and tribes where personal relations are the norm and where cooperation is expected and easily offered among individuals. Works like Subliminal reveal the extent to which our primal unconscious is geared in a great many ways to operate most productively in this small group context, and how it constitutes an impediment to achieving cooperation at the much grander impersonal social scales that pertain in complex society.

Is it realistic to expect our conscious mind to be able to impose its rational process and goals for global level social cooperation on the rest of our being when this much older and significantly more established mind/self is not built to support this process and these goals? Complex, civilized society is just an experiment at the very tip of human development that remains in the initial phase of being tested for its viability. The development of this complex social condition and the technological progress that science has been achieving within this social setting is indeed impressive. But is it sustainable given who we

fundamentally are as homo sapiens? As spectacular as our evolving technology and global economy are and have the potential to become, can we expect our conscious minds to be able to adequately guide us as if we are a unified species and control for the collective negative consequences of humanity's current global behavior?

At the present time [2019], I would offer three to one odds that “No” is the correct answer to this question. We just do not seem to even be able to recognize at the level of our collective consciousness the breadth and depth of the challenge! Alternatives? Can we “engineer” humans or develop androids that are up to the task? Is there time for such radical solutions to be developed and implemented and for them to become standardized? And, if such are actually the proper solutions, what do we do with the vast “waste” of standard humanity? Ah, ETHICS! At every juncture, choices that we modern humans do not seem to be up to, and for which evolution has absolutely not prepared us!

Maybe the best answer is to somehow declare a UNIVERSAL

“TIME OUT”

And give ourselves a chance to slow down, catch our breath, stabilize, attend to current critical needs, and then plan strategically and responsibly for our

COLLECTIVE FUTURE