

— THE —
ANIMAL
— IN THE —
MIRROR



A R N I E B E N N



FLORIDA AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION
Winner, FAPA President's Book Award (2025)
Winner, International Firebird Book Award (2024)

PRAISE FOR *THE ANIMAL IN THE MIRROR*

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Edition: 1.989 ©2025

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Published by Quicycle Books,
a division of the Quantum Bicycle Society,
www.Quicycle.com.

Author website: **www.ArnieBenn.com**

Cover design: Shena Honey Lagapa Pulido

ISBN 979-8-8536-2283-8 (paperback)

ISBN 979-8-8546-6510-0 (hardcover)





for the sake of humanity
and of *all* life

let's *do* the best we can
let's *be* the best we can

let's be *conscious*



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00. THE ANIMAL IN THE AUTHOR

Man will become better when you show him what he is like.

Anton Chekhov

There is an animal in my mirror, but when I look, I only see myself. And if you are anything like me, you might have noticed the same thing.

We are also not alone. Celebrities, sports icons, politicians, doctors, teachers, scientists, clerks, clergy — and everyone else we know — they have animals in their mirrors too. So we might think this whole animal thing is not so bad... but perhaps we should not be too hasty.

This book is about who (or what) is running the show in our heads, and as a consequence, in our personal, social, economic, and political worlds as well. As we unravel this self-evident story, we should recognize familiar players. We know them by names like the *fight-or-flight response*, *might-makes-right*, *rationalization*, *denial*, *love is blind*, *looking out for number one*, “I just went blank on the test,” or “he just seemed like such a nice guy.”

The main challenge facing us, in our modern world of information and technology, is that it can trick us into believing that our behavior is *already* evolved. As a result, we can remain blind to how *unevolved* so much of it actually still is, and we therefore struggle to make things better. Our instinctive behavior keeps our progress, as individuals and as a species, much slower and much more painful than it needs to be.

Fortunately, we can change that.

We human beings like to see ourselves as unique, though our behavior patterns are remarkably simple, predictable, and repetitive. While we may all look and sound slightly different, and while we may all be free to make our own choices, our uniqueness is essentially only skin deep. Since we all share the same biology, we tend to think and react in similar ways in similar situations. If we borrow an analogy from computing, although we may all

have slightly different apps running, we all have the same biological operating system installed. As a result, we will tend to manifest specific thought and behavior patterns when we receive certain types of input from our surroundings. These are the typical human patterns that we all know; we recognize some consciously but others only subconsciously.

Everyone's *fight-or-flight* response works the same way, which is why we all exhibit the same set of body language and facial expressions that represent (and reveal) the same underlying feelings. In most cases, we could not hide these physical signs if we tried. This makes people quite easy to read, if we know how to look, and it also explains why stereotypes exist. As a result, we can learn a lot of very useful and empowering information if we are willing to look at ourselves a little more closely and honestly.

Beneath the trappings of our sophisticated exteriors and modern lives, our physical body is an instinctive biological organism — an animal. Its primary concern is safety and survival, and furthermore, that biological imperative has not changed for *millennia*. Our survival instinct is still our most powerful programming, and as we will see, its language is the palette of our emotions — our fears and anxieties.

Despite how evolved we *think* we are, *our thoughts and actions are usually shaped by our survival instinct, not by our intellect or 'higher consciousness.'*

Most of us, however, seem convinced that precisely the opposite is true, that we usually *do* make free and intelligent choices, and that we *are* really right about everything we *think* we are right about. One of the purposes of this book is to dispel that misperception because it is the cause of almost *all* of our personal and societal dysfunction.

If we do not see the animal in the mirror, the animal is in complete control.

Knowing this is not simply important, it is the *first essential step* if we hope to develop into more civilized individuals and into a more civilized species. A deeper awareness and understanding of ourselves is only possible once the truth of the human body and its biology are clearly understood. Only when we see our limiting and built-in constraints can we begin to aim beyond them. Only when we recognize the degree to which our inner animal is in control can we start to take back some of that control. Consciously.

Until we do, we are living, in many ways, *unconsciously*.

As a result, our world is still plagued by many uncivilized acts and actors. How often do we marvel at “what people are capable of these days?” How often do we lament that we “don’t understand how someone could do

something like that?”

It is therefore very important to note that the societal reality that emerges from our human behavior engine is *neither* related to our degree of technology *nor* to our level of education or intelligence. For evidence, we only need to look as far as the ways in which highly educated humans behaved during the 20th century, and more to the point, how we are *still* behaving, well into the 21st century.

We are obviously not yet living in the civilized world that many seem to think we are. The reason is that we are not yet the evolved species that we like to believe we are. We so often still react from a place of anxiety, fear, or insecurity rather than making wise choices. Greed and corruption are still rampant. Throughout history, rational thinking has, in fact, been the exception rather than the rule — whether in politics, social discourse, or even in *science*. That will not change until we face these uncomfortable truths about our nature and learn to make better choices as a result.

One such truth is that, in our physical form, we are biological animals first and ‘human beings’ second.¹ This means, when we make a choice, we choose the option that makes us feel the most safe. It happens, for instance, whenever we conform to an expectation instead of being true to ourselves.

In everyday life, though, we do not stop and evaluate every thought and action, using cold logic and reason, before deciding something, though that is precisely what we *think* we do. We think we make smart decisions and for the right reasons, like a human should, but instead, we *react*, making quick decisions — thinking *superficially*, with our feelings — like a frightened animal. This is not wise or ‘higher consciousness’ thinking; it is what I call ‘body-thinking’ — that automatic survival thinking that our brain is constantly engaged in.

This instinctive reality helps to explain many common and troubling human behaviors. We will explore some of these in more detail in this book, including but not limited to:

- what depression is, and why we feel it
- why many people (ab)use drugs or alcohol
- why religion so often, and ironically, causes division between people rather than inspiring love, tolerance, and peace
- why many men and women struggle to understand each other
- why many marriages end in divorce
- why many abused people stay in their relationships

¹ See E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Harvard University Press, 2000, ch. 27.

- why smart people can make unwise choices with their money or health
- why so many Republicans and Democrats believe each other to be stupid, misinformed, immoral, or even evil

All of the ideas in this book can easily be extrapolated in order to analyze just about any human motivation, behavior, or scenario in everyday life. My intention is to show exactly how and why issues like these afflict our lives and our society, even across age, cultural, and geographic boundaries. I intend to offer simple, clear, and intuitive answers to all of the questions above, and more. This might seem too lofty a goal to declare at this point, but it will seem less so when we come to appreciate just how similar we all are in our instinctive motivations, and therefore, in our *not-so-complex* human behaviors.

And if *that* seems too lofty, how about this: We will *then* investigate how we might move beyond our instinctive programming, to reach for the *more* that so many of us sense that we can (and perhaps should) be.

And I, for one, believe we *can*.

WHY THIS BOOK?

If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there.

Lewis Carroll

This book is my small offering on the metaphorical altar of human evolution. It was written because I couldn't *not* write it. (I tried.)

It was written because I was frustrated. I was frustrated because I believed, and still do believe, about myself *and* everyone else, that we can absolutely be more than mere animals of the *homo sapiens* variety. I think this has been amply demonstrated, at times, throughout the ages.

I was also frustrated by the *lack* of civilized behavior that I saw in the world around me. As I grew up, I expected to see our species as an evolved one, because that is what we are *taught*. But when I came to see the animal in my own mirror, the animal in everyone else's became all too clear as well.

Once we see something in ourselves — especially a flaw — it becomes even more clearly evident in others because the need to view ourselves favorably is not a courtesy that our instinct extends to others. We therefore see their flaws in neon lights and bold type. Of course, the trick is to realize that those *same* flaws afflict *us* as well. (We prefer to ignore that part, though; transference is far more comforting.)

This explains why others are often nothing more than a mirror for our own behavior, for what we are most critical of in ourselves. If there is an animal in our mirror, it means there is an animal in our *self*.

All of these realizations led me to two inescapable conclusions, which I now believe to be self-evident:

1. Human bodies are biological organisms — fear-based, emotional, groupthinkers whose thoughts and behaviors are selected far more by survival instinct than by reason.
2. As a result, and with few exceptions, our typical behaviors and dysfunctions are not only predictable but repetitive. They will also *continue* to be repeated until we choose to rise above our survival imperatives.

This picture tells a very simple story. We are not as evolved as we like to *think* we are. Not *yet*, that is, because the larger truth is that we *can* be.

As such, knowing how we work is clearly important, but it is just as important that we are then able to apply this insight in order to make our lives and our world better. In the writing of this book I quickly realized that simply describing the problem was not enough. Most of us understand how easily we can be misguided by our fears and insecurities, and there are many approaches and modalities that people already use in order to try and overcome this influence. But even with the help of psychotherapy, support groups, or even religion, *actually* overcoming these fear-based motivations (or the vices we use to soothe them) is consistently no easy task. Hard-won victories can also be short-lived if we do not remain hypervigilant.

I have therefore tried to extend this behavioral model, to investigate whether there are any tools in our consciousness that can help us to make meaningful progress. Can we succeed in becoming more than just the sum of our biology? As a result of this journey:

3. I believe there are specific ways that we can not only push back against our survival instinct but successfully grow beyond its reach, to one degree or another. This is also, in my opinion, the only way to achieve real inner peace.

I must be very clear. I am not writing this book because I have mastered my inner self and am here to tell you how to do the same. I have not — yet — but I am working on it and I can sense a little progress. I am writing this book because I believe I see in which *direction* mastery lies, and I am frustrated at how often we seem to congratulate ourselves for heading in *other* directions. And sometimes for bullying others into doing the same.

I believe that shining the light of analysis onto the most fundamental of our driving forces is the best way to make us better and wiser. It may, in fact, be the *only* way.

This book therefore aims to clarify our true biological nature, and then to offer an approach to combating its negative effects in our lives. It is my sincere hope that you will find this model, as well as the philosophical perspective that follows, as meaningful, useful, and empowering as I have.

THIS MODEL

The greatest sin is to be unconscious.

Carl Jung

The essence of this model can be boiled down to one simple concept. Fear is the default human emotion. It is a direct consequence of our biology, and it makes us insecure emotional groupthinkers. All of the dysfunction, conflict, anxiety, and emotional pain that we experience emanates from this fear — which is, *specifically*, our body's fear of death. *That* is the trunk of the tree. That is the cause.

(Please note that, even if the mind thinks it does not fear death, the body *always will*. As we will see, emotions are generated by the body, not the mind. That means, even if we do not fear death, conceptually, we may still manifest the dysfunction associated with our body's fear of death.)

Conquering dysfunction or vices, attaining inner peace, and building a tolerant and cooperative society are *all* a matter of diminishing our subconscious fears and learning to rise above the level of our basic biological programming. We have to engage our *consciousness* in this effort because it is the only internal tool we possess for controlling our own behavior.

This model operates — and offers benefit — at the level of the individual. As a consequence, the more of us that evolve, the more civilized our society will become.

An evolutionary shift in human consciousness can *only* occur at the level of the individual. It cannot be done through legislation or indoctrination. Conscious evolution can only be done in freedom and through choice. This is self-evident.

As individuals, since we cannot eliminate the emotions of fear from our biology, the only way to conquer fear is to first *understand* it clearly, and then to develop a *perspective* that can enable us to better control our biological programming. This opens the door to undermining, discrediting, or transcending fear as our primary motivator, to one degree or another.

This, in turn, allows us to engage with existence as the conscious beings that we believe we already are.

We will investigate this all-important ‘last stage of the process’ in the last part of the book, once the human condition has been adequately unveiled and exposed.

While I am not a mental health professional, this book’s behavioral model has been vetted in consultation with several gifted professionals in the fields of psychiatry, neurology, psychology, social work, the clergy, and even relativistic quantum mechanics. (For those who might be interested, a little detail on my background can be found in the Appendix.)

Although I seek to make arguments that are self-evident, serious critics require evidence to back up claims or else anyone can just say anything. And many do. My intention is therefore to strike a respectful balance.

I believe that this book speaks so strongly to our very real and common daily decision-making experiences that the reader’s own experience is the only yardstick needed to judge the truth or relevance of the material. On the other hand, I very much respect the scientific process for its objectivity — that trait so sorely lacking in us humans — so I cite research to back up my arguments at certain points, without getting bogged down in too much academic technicality. Additional sources can be found easily enough online. (When we do cross over from science into philosophy in the third part of the book, we will highlight the transition clearly.)

You will notice that this model invokes generalizations rather freely. Some people may feel that generalizations are untrue (or not useful) simply because they *are* generalizations. (Perhaps because they undermine our sense of ‘uniqueness.’) On the contrary, though, generalizations teach us about how *most* of us tend to behave or believe, and while there are always exceptions and explanations, things that are ‘generally true’ can be quite illuminating about the human condition.

Notably, without generalizations, we could not have fields like psychology, in which we classify and diagnose mental states and behaviors. Generalizations can therefore teach us a lot about ourselves if we are willing and courageous enough to look.

CONSCIOUS BEHAVIORAL EVOLUTION

Every choice you make either reinforces the person you are, or moves you toward the person you are going to be.

Ranal Currie

The term *evolution* will come up repeatedly in this book. In science, the word *evolution* refers to the gradual genetic changes that give rise to new species or adaptations. We will not be using it in this literal context, but rather in its metaphorical context. The evolution we are concerned with is the process of ‘becoming better,’ of elevating ourselves and our behavior as a species over time. Our focus will therefore be on the issue of *conscious behavioral evolution*, the kind that can lead us to create a more civilized world and more deeply fulfilling lives (even if the world around us is not evolving in concert).

We are capable of evolving. We have, at times, demonstrated it, for instance when we have chosen democracy over tyranny or equality over misogyny, and there is room to continue demonstrating it. If it is right and good that we evolve as a species, as communities, and as individuals, then we should pay more attention to that journey. Surely such a lofty purpose in life is more worthwhile and fulfilling than a material and spurious one — one lived at the level of the animal. In fact, if the evolution of our consciousness is the *most* important thing, then we should be focusing on it the *most*.

I believe the process of evolving involves striving to be human beings first and animals second, despite the incessant, corrupting influence of our biology. Philosophically, this seems like it represents the greatest or most complete experience of consciousness — as an *awareness* that is knowingly piloting its physical body like a virtual reality avatar, in control of its experience as opposed to operating under the spell of biological automation.

Understanding the ideas in this book does not mean that our issues or dysfunctions will automatically be resolved. They arise from our fear, from our deepest default programming. What understanding these things *does* mean is that our issues will become a lot more clearly *identified*. This is important because, when we come to do the work of improving ourselves and overcoming what holds us back, we will know that we are working on the right issues — the *root* cause. We will know that we are seeing it for what it really is. This saves time, it makes the inner work of pushing back against our fears far more likely to bear fruit, and it helps us avoid the self-delusion that lives in our many forms of rationalization and justification.

Only once we understand *this* basic level of our physical existence can we hope to move on to any kind of deeper understanding.

Unfortunately, elevated ideas, whose merit may even be self-evident, will still be resisted by the insecure (or the powerful), who seek ever-increasing amounts of control, conformity, and reassurance in search of that elusive sense of physical security. Unfortunately, those who believe

themselves to be the most evolved — those trying to make ‘better’ decisions for others — are often the least able to see the unevolved in their own thinking and behavior.

As unflattering as it is to hear, *most human beings seek validation, not truth*. Then, when we find validation — of what we *already* believe — we call it the truth so that our fears can be quieted.

(We are capable of rising above this level of comfort-seeking thinking, but only in proportion to our evolution; only in proportion to how in control we are of our emotions. Even the most evolved among us, though, are still somewhere on this behavioral spectrum.)

These ideas are particularly important at this time because we are approaching a turning point as a species on this planet. Our population density is increasing, as are both our resource demands and our production of waste and pollution. At the same time, our available resources are becoming depleted. If we do not control our primary motivator — our fear — then we travel in the direction of shortage, conflict, suffering, pain, and war. If we are able to rein in our fears, our future lies before us, incandescent with cooperation, opportunity, discovery, and perhaps even transcendence.

The choice is ours... but only to the extent that we are *first* willing to acknowledge the biological truth about ourselves, as individuals, as cultures, and as a broader society.

Coexisting is only possible if we are tolerant of one another. We must therefore start getting used to compromise, and to the idea that we need *not* agree in order to get along. Diversity of opinion is valuable. Beauty is about the harmony between opposites, as are the physical forces of the universe. The only reason that we vote in a democracy is so that we can coexist *without* having to agree. Similarly, freedom of speech is *only* necessary to protect the speech we find most distasteful. How often we lose sight of these obvious and essential truths.

How oblivious we are to the fact that our need for agreement is a *biological* one — an imperative toward groupthink, a fearful and knee-jerk reaction to any lack of conformity or familiarity. (We will investigate in more detail how these ideas apply to politics in a later chapter.)

It is my hope that this book inspires those who read it to become more attuned to their biological motivations, and therefore more empowered to reclaim increasing control from their inner animal. This is the path on which we evolve our consciousness and our behavior, and along which we discover and employ our free will. (We will define in chapter 2 what free will actually *is*, and how to ensure we are using it. Most of us are *not* using it as often as we believe, and there is evidence that appears to verify this.)

But if we do not (or will not) see the animal in our mirror, the animal remains in complete control, and real freedom of choice remains, sadly — wastefully — beyond our grasp. This is simply because those who believe they are already at their destination will obviously not go out in search of it.

What follows in this book will take all of us off our pedestal a little, at least, initially. By the end, though, we should have arrived at a somewhat different and more empowered perspective.

The experience of looking in the mirror closely can be uncomfortable at times, but we will get to know ourselves (and everybody else) a lot better in the process, and that is a journey well worth taking. As we will hopefully see by the end, once we are off the high horse of our own perceived superiority, we are *not* stripped of meaning and purpose in life. For the first time, we may in fact see them — or the path toward them — lying before us with increased clarity.

I believe that we are capable of being more than the sum of our biological and emotional programming. Our sameness is more than simply a reflection of our connectedness. It can teach us that the things we give the most power to in our lives sometimes deserve the least. It can teach us that every one of us is just as special as we each think *we ourselves* are. Just imagine a world in which we all shared this belief, and acted accordingly.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.

Michelangelo

My intention is to lay out the process of conscious evolution in 3 stages. These are also reflected in the book's three-part structure:

CONSCIOUSNESS LEVEL 1: **ANIMAL**

- We remain unconscious until we *recognize* our animal nature

CONSCIOUSNESS LEVEL 2: **HUMAN**

- We become human when we learn to *manage* our inner animal

CONSCIOUSNESS LEVEL 3: **BEING**

- We can access inner peace when we learn to *transcend* the animal

In Level 1, our human animal will be exposed and laid bare. We will learn exactly why we think and do what we do.

In Level 2, we will discuss the ways in which we typically try to manage the dysfunction that arises from our animal behavior engine. We will also analyze some very specific and important examples — the issues that shape our lives and our history, clarifying how each is a simple and predictable manifestation of our survival instinct's emotional groupthink. We will see why we vote the way we do, why we anesthetize our emotions with mind- or mood-altering substances, why we harbor prejudice, why we accept situations that do not make us happy, why 'love is blind,' and much more.

In each of the nine topic chapters, we will look at how we might use our consciousness to push back against our instinctive thinking and behavior by asking: (a) How does our instinct make us behave in this area? and (b) How would a more evolved or civilized person behave? We may then (c) delve more deeply into the subject in some cases.

If a specific chapter topic is not of interest to you, skipping it should not detract from the overall message or experience of this book.

Rightfully, each of the topics we will discuss requires a book (or many books) in its own right, not simply one chapter, in order to do it justice. The intent here, though, is *not* to cover these topics in a comprehensive way, but simply to make the connections, to start the conversations, and to invite the reader to consider that we humans and our sometimes baffling, sometimes infuriating behavior might be more understandable than we thought at first glance. And therefore *more manageable*.

In these first two parts, I will aim for an objective and scientific approach, while doing my best to side-step human bias.

In Level 3, we will expand the constraints of objectivity to include some philosophy and subjectivity. It will become clear that this is unavoidable, given the nature of that part of the discussion.

I will share a specific perspective about consciousness: how we might use it to subvert our fears and to find a greater sense of inner peace, how science fits into it all, as well as even considering the very concepts of consciousness and meaning. My hope is that we will arrive at a perspective that is coherent, meaningful, and — most importantly — *useful*, one that can *actually* help us to make our lives better.

Please note that this journey is not about finding 'the truth.' It is about each of us finding the most useful and empowering *perspective* for ourselves, in order that we can live *consciously*. No two journeys and no two perspectives need to be alike. (Anyone who tells you differently is working to diminish your freedom of choice and to control you, whether or not they are doing so intentionally.) And your perspective certainly need not look like the one that I will describe in this book *as an example*.

Obviously, no specific outcome can be guaranteed because the final part of this approach is necessarily highly individualistic, and will therefore vary from person to person. What I do know is that this approach — this type of perspective — has made a profound difference in my own experience, and in a way that neither religion nor science could accomplish without it.

As a human collective, to the extent that we are able to penetrate beyond the animal layer of our programming, the magnificent societal benefits of engaging together in peaceful cooperation await us.

If we choose it.

If we are strong enough to fight the forces of our animal bodies for it.

LEVEL 1: ANIMAL



LEVEL 1 CONSCIOUSNESS:

*Learning To **Recognize** The Animal*

LEVEL 0: UNCONSCIOUS

Each of us is born into a human body, and we will live out our lives within it.

The human body is a mammal, biologically programmed with a survival instinct. Like all species, it *must* be programmed that way in order to exist as a stable and self-sustaining species.

Unfortunately, that programming also makes us fear-based, instinctive, emotional groupthinkers. And *that* is the cause of *all* of our personal and societal dysfunction.

And the unconscious scarcely realize!

LEVEL 1: CONSCIOUSNESS

The first leveling up of consciousness is achieved when we become aware of what is happening inside of our internal behavioral engine *while* it is happening. We *recognize* the inner animal and its insecure and defensive motivations.

Only then can we hope to rise above that base level of our programming, let alone to express any amount of control or mastery over it.

Level 1 Consciousness — that *recognition* of the human animal in the mirror — is the purpose of Part 1 of this book.

In order to level up our consciousness, each of us must do the ongoing work of incrementally getting better at *recognizing* our body's underlying safety agenda.

01. THE ANIMAL IN THE MIRROR

IN THIS CHAPTER:

1.1: THE HUMAN ANIMAL

- The Animal In The Mirror
- Animal Instinct
- The Human Animal
- Human Groups
- More Than Biology?

1.2: HUMAN PROGRAMMING

- Emotion
- Brain Architecture
- Habits
- Challenges?
- Biology vs Consciousness
- Our Primal Truth

* * *

1.1. THE HUMAN ANIMAL

THE ANIMAL IN THE MIRROR

Dogs never bite me. Just humans.

Marilyn Monroe

The vast majority of us seem to believe that we operate on a more evolved level than animals — that we are wise, sophisticated, intelligent, and (for some, even) spiritual beings. As humans, we have always prided ourselves on *not* being animals, and we often brag about our superiority over them.² But throughout history we have run our lives and societies like animals, and as this book will outline, we still do, in a great many ways.

We humans tend to believe that we think about our choices, every time one presents itself, and *then* we make informed and smart decisions freely. But while we are capable of this, we do it far less than we think. Instead, our lives and our world are in the condition they are in precisely because *almost all of our choices are arrived at through instinct, not reason*. Our bodies are animals — not metaphorically or theologically, but in the literal biological sense of the word.

That, alone, explains a lot.

By means of our emotions, our survival instinct prompts us to feel, and therefore to act, in ways that will improve our safety and diminish our vulnerability.³ Only those who achieve mastery over their impulses are able to avoid this automatic human reaction on a consistent basis. No easy feat.

On the other hand, we are capable of being so much more than just animals. We can produce music, art, science — works of great beauty and complexity. We can strive for the spiritual and revel in abstraction. We can elevate ourselves above the animal if we choose to, and many of us succeed to one degree or another. But on an anatomical and physiological level, our default (biochemical) programming is exactly the same as that of an animal, and the behavioral consequences are far-reaching and unavoidable.

Human and animal bodies have the same chemistry, basic organs, and physiology. For the most part, the same molecules make up our bodies and the same nutrients nourish our cells. Indeed, because animal organs perform

²For example, Genesis 1:26: “... and [Man] will have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the heavens, the animals...”

³ W. McDougall, *An Introduction To Social Psychology*, Methuen & Company, 1909, pp. 44, 50.

the same functions as their human counterparts, there are even certain animal organs that can be transplanted into humans.⁴ Genetically, we are far more similar than we are different — more than 98% similar in some cases.⁵ The fact that research into the brains of animals, even laboratory rats, can lead to important strides in human neuroscience makes the case quite clear.

So, by looking at animals more closely we can learn illuminating things about ourselves. This can then, in return, teach us illuminating (and perhaps surprising) things about animals.

ANIMAL INSTINCT

Animals operate according to their survival instinct, and their instinct is shaped by two unavoidable truths about their world: They are *mortal*, and they face *competition* for their survival.

1. ANIMALS ARE MORTAL:

They can (and will) die, and death must be avoided for as long as possible. Every choice they make is designed to ensure that they and their group survive. It is their most powerful drive, chemically programmed into their DNA. Fight or flee; stay alive. Even the simplest bacteria operate this way. They consume energy, eliminate waste, and reproduce their genes. The more complex the organism, the more sophisticated it is at avoiding danger, surviving, and reproducing. The longer it lives, the more offspring it can produce, and the better the chances that the group will survive.

2. ANIMALS FACE COMPETITION:

They live in a world of limited resources, and they must compete for them against other animals — for their actual physical survival. Such competition (and sometimes simply *being outside*) places their lives in almost constant danger. This is most true for the vulnerable prey animals because they *are* the next meal. Predatory animals, on the other hand, will always feel more secure, whether in groups or on their own, since they have far fewer who are able to predate on them. As a result, animals that feel vulnerable will organize into groups; survival is a *safety-in-numbers* game. One zebra alone is far

⁴ As an example, see NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information) article: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3246856/>.

⁵ As an example, see <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/tiny-genetic-differences-between-humans-and-other-primates-pervade-the-genome/>.

more likely to be eaten by hungry lions than one zebra in a large herd. Or one sardine. Technically, the weak can stand up to the strong if they have the numbers (as the famous “Battle At Kruger” video demonstrates so poignantly. In this remarkable scene, a herd of wildebeest confront a pride of lions to rescue a captured calf).⁶ Overall, though, competition in nature ensures that those who survive will be the fittest and most adaptable, ecologically. Their reproduction will therefore serve the survival of the species better than replicating the traits of those least fit to survive.

From the point of view of a vulnerable animal in an unforgiving world, having no group sets them up for imminent death. All who fear for their survival will therefore seek to join a group for protection — for security.

This group, with its force of numbers, is *us*. Other groups are *them*, the competition for resources — for life itself.

An animal therefore thinks in terms of *us* and *them*. The more vulnerable an animal feels, the more *them* are feared and the more insular and afraid *us* become. Prey animals are therefore experts at differentiating, at identifying threats, because ‘different’ or ‘foreign’ represents possible danger.

Even within their group, animals who are strong, dominant, or predatory find their sense of security in being strong and dominant. Those around them are compelled into submission in response, either through fear or through combat. In the presence of dominance, the other animals behave in a subservient or submissive way because they are afraid to confront the alpha. This represents the absence of a threat for the dominant animal, who can then feel safe in his (or her) ‘untouchability.’

The dominant animal will still *feel* insecure, though, because that is instinctive. It may even have to fight to maintain its dominance, but it will always do its best to *express* dominance in search of the kind of security that comes from dominant strength. (Even though it is actually unattainable.)

THE HUMAN ANIMAL

This entire description applies just as accurately to humans.

While we may be the ‘apex predator’ on Earth vis-a-vis animals, as far as other humans are concerned, we can be predator or prey, or even both at the same time. While there are certainly many people who behave in predatory ways, most ‘decent, law-abiding’ people are not generally predatory. This is

⁶ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU8DDYz68kM> Video title: “Battle At Kruger”

the reason that most people — especially those most on the receiving end in life — will tend to relate to the world as the prey animals in this metaphorical comparison.

Like animals, human bodies are innately vulnerable and they have to work hard to survive in spite of it. The body regulates energy so it can maintain the right temperature. When badly injured, parts of the body will shut down, one at a time, trying to buy time for the most essential organs to stay alive as long as possible. Our cells are designed to replicate and repair damage, we possess a powerful drive to reproduce, and so on.

Like animals, we must compete for our survival in a world of limited resources. We must work or we starve. We feel vulnerable because we can be hurt or killed, so we also have the same chemical *fight-or-flight* response. We therefore also organize ourselves into groups of *us* and *them* in order to feel protected. The vulnerable will only be able to feel safe to the extent that they are living in a place, and within constraints of civility, that allow them to feel protected.

The strong, dominant, or predatory humans are still nonetheless mortal. They will therefore only feel safe to the extent that they are themselves part of a group, wielding their dominance over others, or to the extent that they are accumulating wealth and power with which to fortify their safety. In the process of this vain (and insatiable) pursuit, the lives of many others can be made miserable or painful as a consequence.

HUMAN GROUPS

Humans will reliably find a group to join — a religion, a party, a gang, a fan club, an organization or ideology — because there is safety in numbers. Just about everyone needs community.⁷ If we do not have a group, our sense of vulnerability will become overwhelming to us.⁸

We not only need to belong to a group, we also need to *conform* to that group. We cannot risk being ejected from the group because we feel that our survival depends on belonging. We therefore tend to behave in ways that mirror our fellow group members or friends. Subconsciously, we want to show them that we are ‘the same’ as they are so they do not feel threatened

⁷ See also Z. Liberman, A. Woodward, K. D. Kinzler, “The Origins of Social Categorization,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 21(7), May 2017

⁸ K.S. Rook, “The Functions of Social Bonds: Perspectives From Research on Social Support, Loneliness and Social Isolation”, *Social Support: Theory, Research and Applications*, Springer 1985

by us. How many times have we each felt compelled to dress or to talk a certain way in order to fit in, or in order not to stand out?

This is so ingrained in our nature that we typically even do it when we speak to another person, either by agreeing with what they are saying, by relating that we had a similar experience, or by physically mirroring their body language. If they have a hand in a pocket, we will tend to do likewise; if they cross their arms and point a foot to one side, we will tend to copy this. We are attempting to build a rapport with them on multiple levels without even being aware of what we are doing.

Similarly, within our groups, we will avoid behavior that might make the group uncomfortable and place our ‘accepted’ status at risk. So powerful is our drive to conform to the herd that some human animals will shun their own child or kill a family member⁹ for not conforming to their group.

Being in a group is not wrong or bad, per se. It is a natural tendency and fills a legitimate human need. Just make sure to see it for what it is — our animal instinct responding to our innate vulnerability, to our very mortality, and doing so through the lens of fear.

We either choose the group to which we already have a connection, or into which we were born, or the group whose ideas are most in synch with our own. Then, once we belong in our group, our survival instinct will constantly prompt us to interpret and rationalize everything in our lives and surroundings to reinforce that *our* group is the right one. We will feel an unrelenting urge to reject any indication or suggestion that our group or its values (or leaders) might be wrong.¹⁰

Furthermore, as far as our instinct is concerned, it is not enough just to be part of a group. It is important to be part of a group that will *survive*. We must therefore believe we are in the strongest or best group — the *right* and most justified group — so that we, by extension, feel most validated and safe. We rationalize and justify until we have contorted the reality around us to tell the story the way that makes us feel the most safe. Reality, of course, has not been distorted in any way. It is only our own perception that we have warped in order to bring our chosen illusion into focus.

Most humans are not interested in fact or truth. We are interested in validation — of what we *already* believe — because that is what makes us feel safe.

⁹ C. van Baak, et al. “Honor Crimes in the United States and Offenders’ Neutralization Techniques,” *Journal of Deviant Behavior*, January 2017

¹⁰ M. McKay, P. Fanning, *Self Esteem*, New Harbinger Publications, 2005, p. 1.

While we may occasionally change groups due to circumstances, new discovery, or disillusionment, we will once again seek to validate our new group's values in order to feel safe. This need to feel right will cause us to regularly misinterpret what our own behaviors represent, and we will selectively interpret information in a way that upholds our existing beliefs. This is known as confirmation bias.

The less vulnerable we feel, the less we might notice (or even agree that we have) this bias, but we all have it, by virtue of our biology; it is simply a matter of degree. For the more evolved among us, it might only be minimally impactful on our lives. The more vulnerable we feel, though, the *more* we need to believe that we are right about the things we and our group believe. As a result, this need is often exacerbated in people who have an increased sense of vulnerability — people who see themselves as being disempowered, unattractive, short, overweight, poor, or 'not good enough' in some way.

For the average human, once our group identity is in place, our instinct tells us on a visceral level that 'our' group is in competition with 'theirs,' and that our very survival is at stake. It insists that *our* group is right — which therefore makes *theirs* wrong. And since we are the superior group and they are the inferior group, we are justified in fighting for our group using any and all means at our disposal. Victory at all costs.

We find interesting evidence for this in the way that our brains process empathy. Researchers have uncovered an 'empathy gap,' where subjects are found to show much more empathy for people who are from their own group than for people who are not. Our brains actually process empathy differently for people based on whether or not they are one of *us*.¹¹ It is this 'dehumanizing' of others in the name of our group's superiority that makes things like slavery, lynching, terrorism, war, or genocide possible.^{12,13}

We might not like to think about it — because it does not fit our

¹¹ Xiaojing Xu, Xiangyu Zuo, Xiaoying Wang and Shihui Han, "Do You Feel My Pain? Racial Group Membership Modulates Empathic Neural Responses," *Journal of Neuroscience*, 1 July 2009, 29 (26) 8525-8529

¹² N.S. Kteily, G. Hodson, E. Bruneau, "They see us as less than human: Meta-dehumanization predicts intergroup conflict via reciprocal dehumanization," *Journal of Personal and Social Psychology*, 2016 Mar;110(3):343-70.

¹³ N.S. Kteily, E. Bruneau, "Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2017, 26(6), 487-494

elevated self-image — but humans are groupthinkers. We are conformists.¹⁴

You probably realize, of course, that we are all part of more than one group. I might be an American, Caucasian, ex-patriot South African, heterosexual, socially-liberal, fiscally-conservative male who likes the Lakers and any good football game.¹⁵ (Were you paying attention to the thoughts and associations that just popped into the back of your mind as you read each of my descriptors? Were any of your biases triggered? If I were to mention my religion or the way I voted in the last election, might *that* trigger a bias?)

So I belong to several groups. Which one will command my attention in the moment? Which takes priority in my thinking? The answer is simple. Since fear is our deepest truth, our attention will always be focused on the group identity that is under the greatest imminent threat. If America were under attack, I am an American first and all other allegiances are irrelevant at that moment. If I am the only male at a bridal shower, my instinct is focusing only on the gender gap since patriotism is not at stake. And if the USA is playing in the FIFA World Cup Final,¹⁶ I will either be there or I will be watching the game on TV... unless there is a war on.

And if we may extend the metaphor in order to reinforce the point: We are so afraid of one another, on this planet, that even in the 21st century, we still show ourselves to be capable of deception, violence, war, and brutal torture. Imagine how afraid we might become if we were to discover that some of those UFO stories are actually true, and if we were to confirm contact with a far more advanced extra-terrestrial species. Our groupthinking reactions would probably not paint a very flattering picture of our species. (Certainly not if the visitors had caught any of Hollywood's alien invasion movies.) And how quickly might such a development unite all of humanity across previously unbridgeable divides?

The point is that all human beings behave in similar ways. We are always working to soothe our innate sense of chemical insecurity. It is chemical because it is a direct result of our biochemistry, the complex system that is designed to keep us alive in a world of mortal competition for

¹⁴ C. Chan, et al. "Identifiable but Not Identical: Combining Social Identity and Uniqueness Motives in Choice," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (October 2012), pp. 561-573

¹⁵ I mean the 'beautiful game' with the *round* ball, the one where the same players can play both offense *and* defense.

¹⁶ I dare to dream...

limited resources. It is a system made up of physiology as well as psychology. All of our faculties are in service of the whole, and the job of the whole is to stay safe, to stay alive, and to reproduce so that the species can survive.

While we are undoubtedly very smart and communicative, we are animals, in the literal sense of the word, and for all of recorded history we have acted accordingly, with few exceptions. It has made and continues to make our history painful and violent. It makes many of our relationships difficult or divisive. We have it within our capability to change that behavioral trend, but it will not happen until we first see our fearful and self-centered nature for what it is. Only then do we regain choice. Until then, we have only the illusion of choice as we simply and predictably — and subconsciously and defensively — *react*, in service of our group and of our vain attempt to flee from mortality.

MORE THAN BIOLOGY?

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind.

Albert Einstein

Just because our bodies are programmed to run according to instinct does not mean that we are incapable of more. That should be clear to anyone who understands the beauty and complexity of a symphony or a Da Vinci, and the profound contributions of great (though flawed) individuals like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, who led their people to overcome their instinctive passions at very charged moments in history. And we will need more such leaders.

We are all aware of people who do for others at great risk to themselves: journalists reporting from within dictatorships, nurses treating dangerously contagious patients, Doctors Without Borders, Iranian women flaunting hijab in hand at a repressive Mullah regime, Gentiles hiding Jews from the Nazis during the Holocaust, and many other examples from every corner of the globe. Most of us also probably know someone who claims to have had a spiritual, transcendent, or unexplained experience, or we might believe that we have had one ourselves.

This shows that we are capable of more, capable of rising above our chemistry and behaving according to abstract or selfless ideals, but that does not mean we automatically *do*.

In general, most of us tend to live our lives according to our default programming. It is as if our subconscious mind holds an image of what will make us and our group feel more safe, and then we strive toward that image. We react to the situations around us, always motivated by what will increase security and decrease vulnerability and anxiety. Our mind then dresses up our ‘choices’ in so many layers of justification and story, to make us feel good about them, that we blind ourselves to the real puppet master — our survival instinct, our fear.

All of us behave this way, to one extent or another. Like so many things in life, there is a behavior spectrum, from mild to extreme, and the self-aware would do well to figure out where they are on it.

There is a very important consequence of this. If spirituality or transcendence is our goal, it is *only* possible to the extent that we first understand our animal nature... or else we have failed (by self-delusion) before we can begin the journey.

If we do not see the animal in the mirror, the animal is in complete control.

We will delve further into the topics of religion, spirituality, and even ‘higher consciousness’ in later chapters. This chapter, however, is about their necessary pre-cursor: self-awareness. Awareness of our *biology*. Without an understanding of our body’s animal nature, transcendence will elude us no matter how we dress and no matter how pious our actions appear.

1.2. HUMAN PROGRAMMING

EMOTION

Directly or indirectly the instincts are the prime movers of all human activity.

William McDougall

Many people seem to believe that emotions come from our intelligence: that we think about things and what they mean to us, and then we *feel* about them, based on our thinking. The truth is, in fact, exactly the opposite!

Emotions are instantaneous. They happen as soon as our senses receive input from our surroundings. Emotions are visceral. They are reactions to the world around us and they are designed to help us survive. As we will see

below, on an anatomical level, *emotions come from our survival instinct, not from our intellect.*

When a motivation to act arises within us, it is accompanied by an emotion. Emotions give context to our impulses; they label them immediately as either positive or negative, based on how they *feel*. There is simply not enough time to consciously think about our feelings before they make themselves felt.

Emotions are largely — though not entirely — outside of our conscious control because they “emanate from subcortical areas of the brain.”¹⁷ This means that, since our fear-based emotions are born in the limbic system — which lies deeper within the brain, literally *beneath* the cerebral cortex — it is not operating in the province of logic and reason. Logic and reason only operate in the cerebral cortex, but almost all of our motivations to act are instinctive.

Eminent social psychologist William McDougall believed that, without our powerful instinctive impulses, the human being “would become incapable of activity of any kind; it would lie inert and motionless like a wonderful clockwork whose mainspring had been removed... These impulses are the mental forces that maintain and shape all the life of individuals and societies, and in them we are confronted with the central mystery of life and mind and will.”¹⁸

Recent studies are accumulating more evidence that the brain even uses emotion strategically, “influencing economic and social decisions that were once viewed as the sole province of cold-hearted reasoning processes.”¹⁹ As such, emotions play a far more active role in our decision-making than we might have expected.

Emotions are our prime movers. They are our survival instinct’s alert system, telling us how secure or insecure our instinct feels at every moment. From a survival standpoint, every new development is either negative or positive, either increasing vulnerability or reinforcing security. We will therefore experience an emotion every time our body receives a new input of information from our surroundings, and it will manifest in only one of two forms:

¹⁷ J.H. Turner, *Handbook of Neurosociology*, Springer 2012, p. 128.

¹⁸ W. McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, Methuen & Company 1909, p. 44.

¹⁹ T. Ketelaar, “Evolutionary Psychology and Emotion: A Brief History,” *Evolutionary Perspectives on Social Psychology*, Springer 2015, p. 62.

1. FIGHT OR FLIGHT:

Whenever we feel threatened or vulnerable, we experience a negative emotion. These can include anxiety, fear, anger, hate, resentment, embarrassment, et cetera. They feel bad in order to prompt us to act, to either *fight or flee*, in order to make our situation better or safer. If we succeed, that changes our emotion from feeling bad to feeling good — to let us know that everything is safe again. This explanation applies even to ongoing emotions like shame or depression, which are based on a constant insecurity in the moment, a constant perception (rightly or wrongly) that one's safety or level of acceptance in the group is inferior or hangs in the balance.

2. STAY AND PLAY:

On the other hand, whenever we feel happy, content, or at peace, it is because we feel secure in that moment. Feeling good means that we can stay where we are and continue what we are doing, in the absence of threats. And we like that.

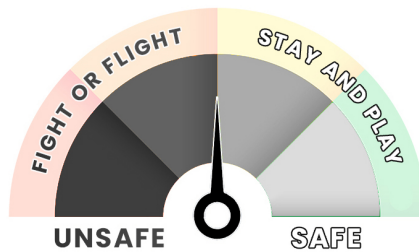


Figure 1: Emotion: our survival instinct's safety meter

Fear is the default human emotion, because vulnerability, mortality, and competition are the default biological truths of all living things. Everything we feel is either about the presence or the absence of fear. Every other issue will therefore be seen through (and will be colored by) this lens.

Taken to its logical conclusion, it means that we will feel the most extreme negative emotion — terror — when we believe that we (or especially our children) are facing imminent injury, torture, or death. These threaten our very survival and the continuation of our species. On the other hand, we will feel the most intensely positive emotion when we feel the most safe, comforted, and loved — when we are with loved ones or when we are in the act of love.

What *I love you* really means to the human animal's biology is *you make me feel safe*. (Many will instinctively want to resist this idea because it undermines our perception of our own sophistication.) This is precisely why

so many girls are attracted to the rough, tough ‘bad boy.’ His physical strength, his confidence to act and take risks, or his willingness to defy authority, all make her feel more safe than the scrawny funny guy’s wits. And the tough guy derives admiration from other men, as a man of strength, for attracting a beautiful woman to his side, and this makes him feel more secure in his perceived strength.

These are instinctive reactions, not intellectual choices.

We can each likely describe a long list of what our closest and dearest people mean to us, and why we love them. (We acknowledge that the concept of love also applies in a transcendent or ‘spiritual’ construct, but that is for a later chapter.) On a biochemical level, though, we love our spouses because they support us, share our burdens, help us feel safe, and help us procreate. We love our friends because they provide us with support and protection. We love our children most of all because they most immediately represent the long-term survival of our genetic material into the next generation. (As unsophisticated as this might make us feel.) For a parent, if all is well with our children, all is well, and we feel good.

So, if we could plot our life’s emotions, like the long strip of a seismograph’s read-out, it would represent a graph of when our survival instinct registered or perceived a threat (or felt vulnerable) versus when it did not.

Understanding what our emotions really represent is a very important wisdom for us. We live our lives almost entirely based on how we feel about things, so recognizing it can be extremely empowering.

Unfortunately, we are psychologically biased by our need to feel good about ourselves. Whenever we feel an emotion, our brain makes up stories about what it means. These include any rationalization or denial, any conveniently selected fact or justification that paints *us* as being in the right and *them* as being in the wrong. This kind of warped and narcissistic thinking cannot but lead us into unwise decision-making and dysfunctional relationships some (or perhaps most) of the time. Even for those of us who consider ourselves to be smart and wise.

Emotion is our prime mover, even in areas that seem to be less about emotion than about reason. There is very interesting support for this found in research into the subject of morality.

Psychologists found that people are very quick to condemn an action they think is wrong, even if they cannot explain *why* they think it is wrong. Even if there is no victim they can point to, no actual harm caused, and the person cannot explain rationally *why* they feel it is wrong, they will nonetheless remain adamant that the action is wrong. (One example, used

by Jonathan Haidt, is a question that forms part of the title to one of his papers: “Is It Wrong To Eat Your Dog?” — meaning, after it died peacefully.²⁰ Such questions evoke an emotional response rather than an intellectual one. We first *feel* that it is wrong, and then we search for a rationalization.²¹ (For more on the concept of morality itself, see the Appendix.)

As humans, we live under the influence of our feelings and our instinct. When we are not aware of it, we are operating on a kind of automatic pilot of reactionary thinking that I like to call body-thinking. But *knowing* it — versus being carried along, oblivious to this unseen current — means the difference between beginning to evolve and merely surviving.

In one sense, it is not bad that our feelings dictate our choices, because just like animals, our instinct has become quite good at identifying physical threats. We can usually size someone up in a split second. One glance at a person and we can often tell quite accurately their gender, age, race, socio-economic status, physical strength, degree of social conformity, level of self-confidence, degree of happiness, fashion sense, level of personal hygiene, and many other intangible body language signals that may not even register in our conscious mind. In less than a second, we have assessed the person, and then we behave accordingly.²² We will either be open or guarded, feel either secure or threatened, either lead or follow, et cetera.

Instinctive fear can, of course, be positive and functional. When there is real danger, we will avoid it and survive. Our emotional health, however, can span the spectrum, from healthy fear of real danger all the way to unhealthy and imagined fear of almost anything — of life in general. On that end of the spectrum, vulnerability has gotten the best of us and we hide from life in a metaphorical emotional fetal position. We avoid risk and exposure, and we develop a compelling story to explain to ourselves why we do what we do, to validate our choices.

So the system works fine when it comes to physically surviving, but the more vulnerable or insecure we feel, the more we will tend to delude ourselves about what our feelings mean, so we get to feel safe. At that point,

²⁰ J. Haidt, S. Koller, M. Dias, “Affect, Culture, and Morality, or Is It Wrong To Eat Your Dog?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1983, 65:613-28

²¹ See also H. Margolis, *Patterns, Thinking and Cognition*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

²² See also M. Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Back Bay Books, 2007.

even the most intelligent human becomes susceptible to predatory thinking because their brain's highly intelligent rationalization engine can spin anything to their instinctive advantage. Case in point: The Nazis were highly educated and cultured individuals, yet they fell prey to one of the most brutal bouts of genocidal groupthink the world has ever seen.

BRAIN ARCHITECTURE

The structure of an organ affects its function, so understanding the structure of the brain and how it developed can reveal truths about human (and animal) function — our behavior.

Scientists describe the brain as developing in three stages, which also mirror the three general stages of animal complexity — from reptiles to mammals to humans.

1. THE BRAIN STEM (OR REPTILIAN BRAIN):

The deepest structures in the brain, the brain stem and cerebellum, make the animal capable of basic movement, coordination, and automatic actions like breathing. These are the essential functions needed for life, on the basic level of a cold-blooded reptile, and that is why this evolved first. (Reptiles pre-date mammals.)

2. THE LIMBIC BRAIN:

The limbic system, the next layer of the brain, renders the animal capable of emotion, long-term memory, and therefore more sophisticated learning. Emotions tell the reptilian brain how secure it feels, and moves it to react accordingly. It also causes the animal to remember experiences for better preparedness the next time. Emotion emerges specifically from a pair of small structures in the center of the limbic brain, called the amygdala. The amygdala is not only the control center of fear and rage, but also of arousal. It is thus, in very real terms, the center of the emotional brain. For animals, especially mammals, the limbic system represents a significant upgrade to the reptilian brain, and allows for a far greater ability to avoid danger and survive.

3. THE CEREBRAL CORTEX:

The cerebral cortex, the outermost region of the brain, is its most recent evolutionary layer. It is most developed in mammals, enabling them to exhibit more complex behaviors than other animals. In humans, who have the most advanced cerebral cortex, it is the seat of higher thought, reason, and speech — the things that seem to differentiate humans

from animals.²³ This executive layer allows humans to dominate all other species through the use of technology, abstraction, reason, and detailed communication. (And sometimes, also cruelty.)

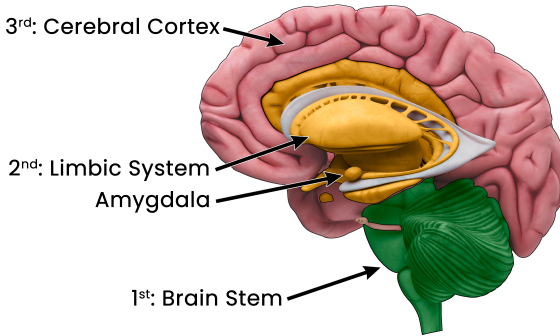


Figure 2: Structure of the brain

All mammals share the same basic brain structures. Even though they may vary in size or impact from species to species, the same structure always performs the same function. In both human and animal brains, emotion is generated in the amygdala and the hippocampus facilitates memory. Because emotion is so closely tied to fear and survival, our attention is generally directed to and held for longer by things that are either threatening or sexual, and from a survival standpoint, this information, more than others, needs to be stored for later use.

In addition, people whose brains suffer damage to the amygdala have difficulty interpreting threats correctly,²⁴ as do people whose amygdala shows lower levels of activity than normal. In some cases, significant damage or under-activity in the amygdala can result in psychopathy.

Research supports the idea that emotions originate in the amygdala,²⁵ even though these signals can then travel up into the cortex for further

²³ Although, certain animals are capable of more advanced language and communication than we might presume, as we will discuss in chapter 12.

²⁴ R. Hortensius, et al, "The dynamic consequences of amygdala damage on threat processing in Urbache Wiethe Disease. A commentary on Pishnamazi et al. (2016)," *Elsevier*, Volume 81, August 2016, pp. 24–34.

²⁵ B. Balleine, S. Killcross, "Parallel incentive processing: an integrated view of amygdala function," *Trends In Neurosciences*, Volume 29, Issue 5, pp. 272–279, May 2006.

processing.²⁶ Once we feel an emotion, we have to make sense of it and its implications. We must reason and rationalize, and then choose an appropriate defensive response. As such, emotions can certainly manifest complex behaviors, which reflect the complexity of our brain activity and psychology. But both the central processing of emotion and its root impulse occur in the limbic system, and are inextricably tied to our survival reaction mechanism.

The amygdala not only participates in both negative and positive emotion, it also plays a role in our perception of emotional intensity.²⁷ Another study even suggests that the eyes send low-grade, raw visual data directly to the amygdala, without even going through the visual cortex, so that the amygdala can generate rapid fear responses without wasting time on further processing.²⁸

The three-tiered structure of the brain clarifies why, when there is a conflict between emotion and logic, emotion usually wins. Emotion trumps logic because it comes from a deeper, more fundamental part of the brain. The limbic system is more directly tied to our survival instinct, which is our most powerful driving force. Logic, on the other hand, belongs to the outermost layer of the brain, the cerebral cortex, making it an evolutionary newcomer, a luxury, a lower priority when (we think) survival is at stake.

When a negative emotion surfaces, our fear response's *security triage system* takes over, and logic and objectivity are sidelined until the crisis has passed. This is why it is difficult to think clearly or make wise decisions when strong emotions are aroused or when we are under stress. We have no bandwidth for clear thinking because we are too busy *fighting* or *fleeing*.

Two common examples are 'going blank' during a stressful test or exam,²⁹ and that 'love is blind' to a lover's faults or motives, to the tune of "*oh, you just don't know her like I do.*"

These biological truths teach us two very important things:

²⁶ H. Barbas, M.A. García-Cabezas, "Prefrontal Cortex Integration of Emotion and Cognition," *The Prefrontal Cortex as an Executive, Emotional, and Social Brain*, Springer 2017, pp. 51-76.

²⁷ L. Bonnet, et al, "The role of the amygdala in the perception of positive emotions: an 'intensity detector,'" *Frontiers In Behavioral Neuroscience* 2015; 9: 178.

²⁸ J. McFadyen, et al. "A Rapid Subcortical Amygdala Route for Faces Irrespective of Spatial Frequency and Emotion," *Journal of Neuroscience*, March 2017.

²⁹ We will revisit this topic in the next chapter.

1. EMOTION IS INSTINCTIVE:

Human emotion comes from our survival instinct and not from our intellect. Consequently, the majority of our thoughts and actions are motivated by our sense of vulnerability, our need for security, and our fear of being hurt or of being wrong. The cerebral cortex just plots and schemes and rationalizes in order to give everything ‘meaning.’ And it makes a good case, too — very believable, fact-based, and multi-faceted — but all in service of the survival instinct’s biased and self-centered safety agenda.³⁰

2. ANIMALS FEEL:

They experience a range of emotions very similar to humans. This is because emotions are triggered by survival instinct, and theirs is virtually identical to ours, anatomically. Animals may or may not be able to make sense of their feelings (or suffering) in an abstract sense to the extent that humans can, and they may not be able to generalize³¹ like we can, but they certainly do feel.

If we understand that our emotions are an instinctive response, alerting us that we are either feeling vulnerable (with a negative emotion) or safe (with a positive emotion), it can transform our lives because it unmasks what is really behind what we do.

Subconsciously, every choice we make is designed to make us *feel safer*. It is not designed to be wise or correct. It is often *not designed at all*, but is simply a reaction.

HABITS

Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

Aristotle

³⁰ See also D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning The Principles Of Morals*, London (A. Millar) 1751 (available on Google Books)

³¹ Temple Grandin, Catherine Johnson, *Animals In Translation*, Harcourt, 2005, page 55.

Habits form as a result of repeated behaviors. Most of our behaviors are actions that are provoked by a survival-instinct response. Habit formation is therefore linked to the emotional center of the brain, the limbic system.

When we feel a familiar emotion, our brain has long since figured out an approach to handling it, and so it will respond using the same mental pathway it did before. It would be not only illogical but also very inefficient for the brain to make new neural pathways for the same, repeated behaviors. To put this another way, metacognition is energy-expensive; unconscious action is much more efficient. So the brain gets used to using the same channels over and over again, and this reinforces behavior patterns at the level of our neural biology.

Dr. Joe Dispenza explains that “a habit is a redundant set of automatic unconscious thoughts, behaviors, and emotions that is acquired through repetition. A habit is when you have done something so many times that your body now knows how to do it better than your mind.”³²

This explains why it is difficult to overcome a habit. If neural pathways in our brains have literally become reinforced through repeated use, it will require that we engage new pathways in order to re-write our patterns of ‘thought traffic,’ our paths of mental least resistance. Fortunately, and *remarkably*, since our brains exhibit neuroplasticity,³³ it means we are indeed able to re-program our brain’s neural connections through different thinking.

As an aside, this is also related to memory. Remembering something frequently means its neural pathways get rewritten — *re-membered* — with each iteration of memory access.

Research shows that habits in animals seem to form as chunks of behaviors in the limbic system before the neural conversation moves into the (infra-limbic) cortex. Researchers found that even ingrained habits (in laboratory rats) can be switched off by manipulating the neurons in those parts of the brain.³⁴

What people may not realize about habits is that they determine our reality far more than our knowledge does. What we *do* determines how our life will unfold far more than what we *know*. As we will revisit in chapter 4,

³² Link: <https://youtu.be/La9oLLoI5Rc> Video title: “How To Brainwash Yourself For Success & Destroy Negative Thoughts! | Dr. Joe Dispenza”

³³ M. Costandi, *Neuroplasticity*, MIT Press; Illustrated edition (August 19, 2016)

³⁴ A.M. Graybiel, K.S. Smith, “Good Habits, Bad Habits,” *Scientific American* (June 2014)

we may know that a habit is bad for us, but that is not enough to protect us from its effects if we do not stop doing it.

CHALLENGES?

Some may feel that there are clear examples of where people appear to transcend their instinctive, fear-based nature, doing things that seem to defy a survival-based programming. Let us briefly consider three such potential challenges.

1. Daredevils

There are situations in which we see people tempting death in order to have fun. There are thrill-seekers who do dangerous things for excitement — free-solo vertical cliff rock climbers, wing-suit base jumpers, and other daredevils. Have they evolved beyond this survival urge? Are they defying their instinctive programming?

Certainly not. The rush of adrenalin — the flood of neurotransmitters they experience and love — is not unlike the effects of a drug or intoxicant. The euphoric and anesthetized feeling is the goal.³⁵

If they truly believed they would die, they would not do the dangerous things they do. The surfer may surf a dangerous break, but not if he *knows* there are several hungry bull sharks prowling the immediate vicinity. He may ski a triple black-diamond back-slopes powder run, but not if he *knows* there are invisible crevices with thousand-foot drops, or bands of hungry grizzlies with the scent of man in their noses.

In general, though, the adrenalin junkie believes the danger is not quite *that* great, or that they are good enough and strong enough to survive the experience unscathed, clutching only excitement from the jaws of exhilarating danger. But thrill-seeking is no less a vice, no less an escape; it really does not make much survival sense to risk death simply for the purpose of entertainment.

In the documentary feature film “Free Solo,” the legendary rock climber Alex Hunnold is the first to scale the three-thousand-foot vertical cliff face of El Capitan with no ropes and only a bag of chalk. While many marvel at the incredible courage and suppression of fear required to attempt this climb, the documentary takes a closer clinical look at the phenomenon.

A brain scan of Hunnold’s amygdala found it to be less active than normal. As we mentioned above, we would expect that he would therefore

³⁵ As we will discuss in chapter 4 about substance (ab)use.

not interpret threats as accurately or as presently as someone with normal amygdala function. It may even take much greater danger — or the greatest danger imaginable — in order to register any significant thrill on his dulled internal excitement meter.

2. Altruism in nature?

Another challenge may arise on the question of altruism. We have all heard of people risking death or injury to do selfless acts for others. There are many examples of human parents sacrificing themselves for the survival of their children, or even those who risk and give their lives for strangers in moments of spontaneous heroism. We even see examples of animals acting selflessly. Does that not contradict the idea that we are only in this for selfish survival motives? And is altruism not a spiritual value?

As the remarkable Battle At Kruger video (referenced earlier) shows, a herd of wildebeest are able to overcome their prey-mentality — the fear of their natural predator — and confront a pride of lions in order to retrieve a captured calf. They did it because, instinctively, the calf represents the future of their species — their collective survival — *and* because they also had the confidence of numbers, horns, and large body mass.

Perhaps the answer is that we consider the survival of our group at least as important, if not more important, than our own personal survival. From the point of view of the survival of our species, the most important thing is that the group (and especially its children) survive.³⁶ This is called inclusive fitness in evolutionary biology, a term coined by William Hamilton in the 1960s. A similar idea is expressed by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*.

The idea is that an individual who is willing to sacrifice themselves for the survival of the group, especially for the young of the group, is still motivated by survival instinct. Group safety and group integrity are more important than the individual, because it is perceived that the good of the many outweighs the good of the individual when group survival is at stake.³⁷ And according to the amygdala, in the center of our brain, survival is *always* at stake; assessing danger is the only language it speaks.

In fact, one is hard-pressed to come up with an example of pure altruism, because so much can be traced back to the benefit of family or the

³⁶ W.B. Swann Jr., et. al., “What makes a group worth dying for? Identity fusion fosters perception of familial ties, promoting self-sacrifice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 106(6), Jun 2014, 912-926

³⁷ John Alcock, *Animal Behavior*, Sinauer Associates, 10th Ed. (2013), ch. 2.

social group, including that which is good for the environment. Examples might include paying the medical bills of a stranger in another city, or supporting an organization that alleviates unnecessary animal suffering.

In this case, though, it is probably far more productive — not to mention valuable for the world — if we focus on *doing* acts of kindness and compassion rather than on worrying about whether they qualify as pure altruism or not.

3. What if I do not fear death, but I fear pain?

Many people I speak to about this model say something like this to me, especially if they are a person of faith. They say they do not fear death in the least, but they do fear experiencing pain. They also fear one of their loved ones experiencing pain or worse.

This does not disprove our model with a counter-example, it once again helps to clarify it.

Pain represents the *body's* fear of death. Since the body is mortal and compelled to survive, it is programmed to avoid death. Pain reports that there is a malfunction or damage of some kind to the body. This is a survival mechanism designed to help the body move away from the problem or to address it. Unaddressed pain portends possible death, and it therefore feels bad to the body.

Emotional pain will also be associated with anything that threatens our survival. This includes the loss of a member of our clan, but most especially one of the children, because they most directly represent the survival of our group (or species) into the future.

Our body-thinking will therefore *always* fear both death and pain.

As such, we will never be able to free our body (or its psychology) from the fear of pain. The best we can do is to free our consciousness from the fear of death, and to put any pain that our bodies must feel into a context that best helps us to deal with it. As we will discuss later, in Part 3, this requires a specific type of broader perspective.

BIOLOGY VS CONSCIOUSNESS

I see as much misery, out of them moving to justify themselves, as them that set out to do harm.

Doc Cochran (Brad Dourif), *Deadwood*³⁸

³⁸ Season 1, Episode 2, written by Malcolm Macrury.

Let us be clear. In this model we are *not* saying that humans are inherently bad. We are saying that humans are inherently contained within a host-organism that is a biological mammal, and which is programmed with a survival instinct that is afraid and self-centric. (Or group-centric.) Our survival instinct then pits us, group against group, in competition for resources and survival.

We are certainly capable of being more than simply our animal components, as mentioned above. I believe we are capable of being kind, compassionate, and civilized beings. But that does not change the reality of the human body's biological programming.

The degree to which our behavior rises above this animal programming is the real measure of our civility and elevation — of our evolution.

We can illustrate this graphically with a simple gradient, representing the spectrum of motivations, from purely biological on the left to purely 'conscious' on the right.

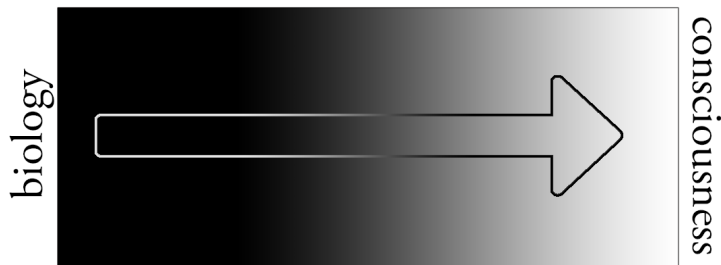


Figure 3: The Spectrum of Motivations

We are born on the left of this spectrum, under the control of pure instinct, and before our higher consciousness has had a chance to develop or emerge. Our parents' job is to guide us toward the right, to become increasingly conscious, civilized, and wise individuals. It is up to each of us whether or not to continue that growth on our own, and the extent to which we succeed will vary greatly.

Please note: I am *not* saying that our goal should be to divorce ourselves from the physical. That is neither necessary nor healthy. Human life contains a rich palette of emotions and pleasures, and as we will discuss in later chapters, there is nothing wrong with enjoying them in a way that is not harmful to ourselves or to others.

We are not here to withdraw from the world; we are here to be *in* the world. A healthier goal is to achieve balance, a harmony between the opposites that make up the dualities of our nature.

In order to pursue this balance, we must first know that the more we allow our biology to control our choices, the more dysfunction will arise. The more we seek to elevate our motivations out of the realm of fear, the more civilized and evolved we and our society will become.

It is that simple.

‘Real’ altruism is therefore neither automatic nor easy because it represents an act of will that supersedes our biological programming. If we master our impulses, we become capable of true altruism — selflessness for idealistic or spiritual reasons.

How often does this type of true altruism actually occur? We will leave that to the reader to contemplate. These questions can be confusing since even charity, which seems so selfless and spiritual, can be motivated by a desire for the admiration of others, or for God’s reward or protection in response to the charity — in response to being a good person. It could be motivated by fear of Divine punishment for *not* being charitable.

On the other hand, it could also be motivated by a desire to become more civilized, or to do what is good, helpful, and compassionate. It can be motivated by a recognition of the Divine in others — in us all.

There are many of us who believe ourselves to be good, selfless, charitable, and giving people. And these values are to be encouraged and developed. But we should also be careful not to think we have achieved self-mastery yet. Who can really say they have mastered their instinctive impulses? Most of us are stumbling along the path, hopefully making a little progress where we can.

We are certainly not ‘there’ yet, as a society or as a species, and this book aims to add one more paddle to our journey up-river, one more booster to the rocket we use against the unrelenting gravity of our nature. A paddle called self-awareness; a rocket called conscious evolution.

OUR PRIMAL TRUTH

It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.

Mark Twain

Free your mind.

Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), *The Matrix* movie

Emotion remains our most primal and powerful physical driving force. *Whenever we are experiencing an emotion, we are experiencing our human animal.*

There are no uniquely human emotions. There are only uniquely human *interpretations* of those emotions — confounded further by the fact that we are more interested in validation than in truth.

Admitting any of these things makes us feel unsophisticated, so we prefer to weave intricate stories to explain why we do what we do and feel what we feel. We try to hide our instinct under a veneer of modernity and complexity. We do not want to see the primal in our modern behavior because it makes us feel bad, but our actions still reveal the truth, especially in areas involving sexuality, money, and power.

Every human interaction falls somewhere on the behavior spectrum, from highly animalistic *human* to highly civilized *being*, and with every degree in between. Overall, in life, where each of us ends up on that spectrum is entirely up to us.

We can even gamify our increasing awareness of it. We can watch our thoughts and reactions throughout the day, and try to figure out where each motivation falls on the spectrum.

If we are prepared to look — because some are *not* — it will not take us long to see the basic truth of our instinctive motivations, in every nuance of every interaction of every individual and community around the globe. As well as in ourselves.

Then, when we see it, we can start working on rising above it.

02. APPLYING THE CONCEPT

IN THIS CHAPTER:

2.1: FREEDOM OF CHOICE

- Free Will
- Anatomy Of Impulse Control
- Test-Taking Anxiety
- Yoga-Thinking
- Real Freedom of Choice
- The Obedience Experiment

2.2: RACISM

- A Practical Race Theory
- What Racism Is *Not*
- Revenge Racism
- Moving Beyond

2.3: THE TRACE-BACK

- Body-Thinking
- The Trace-Back
- Basic Tendencies
- Negative Emotional Reactions

* * *

2.1. FREEDOM OF CHOICE

FREE WILL

Free will is an illusion. People always choose the perceived path of greatest pleasure.

Scott Adams

I am very comfortable with the idea that we can override biology with free will.

Richard Dawkins

Is our instinct, then, running the show completely? Are we automatons, simply reacting to biochemical stimuli? Do we have free will at all, or is it just an illusion, wishful thinking, or a trick of our consciousness?

Some intriguing experiments were performed in the 1980s, by neuroscience researcher Benjamin Libet, that attempted to find this answer. He measured the brainwave activity of his subjects as they made free choices, and he discovered something fascinating. What we perceive as a ‘free’ choice actually begins as activity in the brain moments *before* we become aware of even *wanting* to make the choice.³⁹

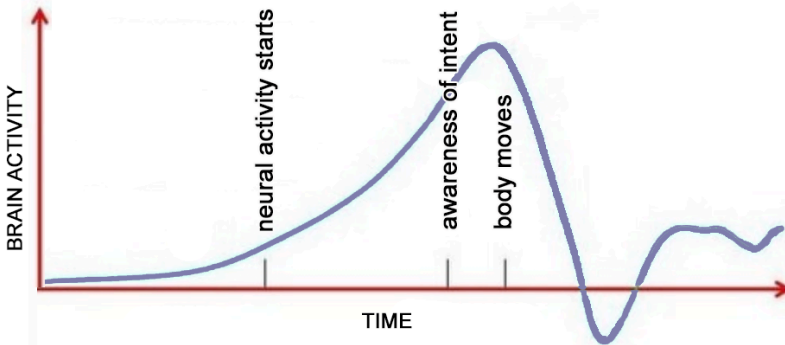


Figure 4: Results of Benjamin Libet's study

³⁹ B.W. Libet, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,” *The Behavioral & Brain Sciences*, **8**: 529–566. (1985)

More recent research showed that brain activity leading up to a so-called free choice can begin up to *ten seconds* before we become consciously aware of wanting to make the choice.⁴⁰ These are remarkable results.

According to the model in this book, it makes sense that we work this way. We perceive input from our surroundings and our limbic brain assesses it to determine if it represents danger or exposes any vulnerabilities. If so, the brain will trigger any one of a number of negative emotions, and this will prompt us to act or move in such a way that diminishes the danger or distances us from it.

This ‘thought process’ will arise in the limbic brain and will then be processed and interpreted by the cerebral cortex. This is where meaning is assigned to the event, as well as where rationalizations and explanations of our ‘choice’ of action are worked out that make us feel better — validated.

And then we act/react.

Some of Libet’s colleagues argued that his results meant that humans do not possess free will, that our behavior is simply dictated in predictable ways by the input from our surroundings, and that we are, effectively, biological automatons. Libet disagreed, believing that his work in fact *clarifies* the meaning of free will.

Free will — freedom of choice — does not mean inventing a motivation out of thin air. It is rather a *veto power* over a natural emotional impulse to do something.⁴¹ Free will occurs when our consciousness vetoes our automated body-thinking.

When a negative emotion arises within our limbic brain, prompting us to act this way or that in order to feel safer, the emotionally wise person recognizes what is happening within. They recognize the fear-response, and instead of acting on it, they veto it. They choose to act according to their values or ideals *in spite of* their fear-response. *That* is free choice.

This definition means that our freedom of choice does not happen automatically. Free will means impulse control — emotional control — and it takes awareness, intention, self-control, and *practice* in order to achieve it.

So, we all have the capacity for free will, but are we *using* it enough?

Are we using it at *all*?

⁴⁰ S. Bode, A.H. He, et al., “Tracking the Unconscious Generation of Free Decisions Using Ultra- High Field fMRI,” *PLoS ONE*, 6(6): e21612, June 2011.

⁴¹ B.W. Libet, “Do We Have Free Will?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6 (8-9):47-57 (1999)

ANATOMY OF IMPULSE CONTROL

My body is just a machine. It is not my truth.

Simcha M. Russak

What is this veto power and how do we engage it?

The first step is that we become *conscious* of our decision-making process. Based on what is happening around us, and based on what we are thinking, our brain generates impulses that prompt us to act, instinctively reacting to the input. These ‘choices’ are not free or chosen. They are reactions, motivated by fear and the need for safety.

If we see a person from another race, religion, team, or party, our subconscious awareness of ‘other,’ of a possible threat, might be piqued, and we might respond in a subtle or perhaps even an overt way.

This is the natural, instinctive prompting we experience from within. We all share this form of bias against at least one ‘other’ idea, group, or individual, to one extent or another, even if only slightly. (Though, for some, vehemently.)

Without knowing how our inner assessment system works — without this self-awareness — no attempt can be made to control our impulses because we will believe that they *are* choices, that they are *already* a matter of conscious control. That they are correct. Our bias blinds us when our insecure animal is in control.

But if we can understand what our emotions *are* and what they mean *while they are happening*, then we have achieved a level of *emotional intelligence*. The next level is then being able to *resist* those instinctive impulses in the moment, and to replace them with a conscious choice.

Free will means that we are aware enough of our inner workings that we can first recognize what our *impulses-to-act* are, and then weigh them against our values, ideals, and goals. We then *choose* how to act, informed by those values, ideals, and goals, rather than simply reacting and taking the path of emotional least resistance. This second step represents an increasing level of *emotional control* — of free will.

In the example of our encounter with an ‘other,’ we now understand that it is a natural, instinctive response to react with bias and prejudice toward anyone who seems different, because to our subconscious, they are from ‘another group.’ This is our animal programming.

But we also see that reacting according to that programming is not only uncivilized but also unnecessary — unless we live in a place where there really are groups who pose a threat to us. In that case, prudence is

appropriate. In most civilized societies, though, the other person probably does not represent any kind of a threat at all.

More importantly, we can transcend our animal reactions if we so choose. The emotionally wise person so chooses, and knows that we can veto that racist or bigoted impulse because it is simply an animalistic fear-response, a defensive quirk built into the virtual reality meat suit we are piloting. (We will investigate racism a little more closely in the next section of this chapter.)

Once a more elevated form of thinking becomes a habit, it can shift to the subconscious realm, where the evolving person no longer even has to think about it.

In the realm of sexuality, for instance, when a man sees an attractive woman, his emotional brain — specifically the amygdala — prompts him to desire her, to approach her, and to seek the pleasure (and therefore the sense of power and security) that comes from dominating her.

Of course, when a man sees this desirable woman on the street in a civilized society, he must exercise restraint over his animal impulses and conform to socially acceptable behavior, in spite of his chemistry, or there may be unpleasant legal consequences. (We will investigate sexuality a little more closely in chapter 7.)

TEST-TAKING ANXIETY

Another perhaps more subtle example — although a very practical one for many — might be dealing with test-taking anxiety. Even though this issue may not trouble all of us, it reveals an important duality in the way our thinking works: *The human brain does not process logic and emotion at the same time.* Let us therefore look at this example in a little more detail than the previous one.

Many students deal with test-taking anxiety on some level, and if they do not understand what is causing it, they cannot do anything about it.

Many people do not seem to know what causes it, perhaps thinking it is because the student does not understand the material well enough, but that is not correct.

As we saw above, the limbic brain — specifically the amygdala — is where emotion is generated, and it is a more primal part of the brain, more directly connected to our survival instinct. The cerebral cortex, where logic and reason operate, is the evolutionary newcomer. Logic and reason are a luxury, so when survival is at stake, they are sidelined while the emotional brain takes over in order to triage the threat situation and deal with the fear.

If a student ‘goes blank’ on a test, it does not necessarily mean that they do not understand the material. It means they are having a fear response. They are afraid that they may not know how to answer a question or that they may get a bad grade on the test, or even fail. “*What if I don’t get into the right college?*” Since their negative emotion is aroused, their emotional brain is trying to triage the perceived ‘threat situation.’ This forces logic to be sidelined while the crisis is dealt with, which prevents the student from being able to think clearly or logically.

This means that, even if they know the material, they will not be able to *access* that knowledge, or reason with it, while they are in a heightened emotional state. The road has been cordoned off. The bridge is out. This lack of clarity then makes them even more anxious, which only reinforces the effect.

This is how the brain operates. It cannot process logic and emotion at the same time. If we want to think logically, we must keep our emotions in check. Consider that, if you had a very important decision to make, with far-reaching consequences, would you rather make it in a state of heightened emotion or in a state of heightened logic? The limbic brain is the former; the cerebral cortex (without too much limbic interference) gives us access to the latter.

Emotion cannot be purged from our system either. It is an integral part of our body’s survival mechanism. This means, in order to control test-taking anxiety, we have to learn to better manage our emotional reactions so that we do not let them build up into a full-blown fear response. If that happens, our mental clarity will be lost. The only way to avoid it is to understand how the system works. Once we recognize how and why emotion trumps logic, we can begin pushing back.

Defeating test-taking anxiety therefore requires that we take back more and more control over our thought process. I call this *yoga-thinking*.

YOGA-THINKING

Let us draw an analogy from breathing.

Our breathing happens automatically and subconsciously, without our need to focus on it. However, we *can* consciously control our breathing if we choose to, for activities like yoga or meditation.

In the same way, if we are not intending otherwise, our thought process will run automatically, and our emotions will trump our logic as we *react*. But if we know how the brain works, we can become more aware of our thought process, and even use it to exert more control over our emotional

thinking. We can learn to better manage our emotions, or perhaps even to control them a little better so that they do not control us (as much).

Therefore, in order to deal with test-taking anxiety, we have to practice both being *aware* of this idea and also taking back more mental control. It may not be easy to do (or even to *remember* to do), at first, but it gets better with practice.

On *every test*, we should practice the following:

1. *BEFORE THE QUESTION:*

Before we read a question, we must remember that we may be about to have a fear reaction when we read it. We may not be able to answer the question at first glance, and that may make us worry that we might not be able to answer it *at all*. Expect this inaccurate assessment!

2. *PREPARE TO CHECK OUR EMOTIONS:*

Then, we must prepare to keep our emotions in check so that we can keep thinking clearly. One strategy is to imagine that we are talking to our emotions as if they are the small child inside, and as if our logical mind is the wise, comforting adult. Tell the emotional child to let you read the question a few times and think about it for a few minutes before they start to worry. It is very important to realize that, in tests, we are not meant to know the answer as soon as we glance at a question. Tests (and life) do not work that way. They present us with challenges, and we have to take time to figure out how to solve them, using what we know. That is the process. It seems that many students expect that if they do not see the answer as soon as they glance at the question, then they do not know it, and they will never be able to do it. They then become anxious. This is an unfair expectation, not to mention an inaccurate assessment. It is important to keep this in mind *while* we read the question.

3. *ALLOW SPACE FOR THE PROCESS:*

We must then allow ourselves the time and space to think about what is being asked, to re-read the question a few times, and to start planning how to *look* for a good answer, using what we have learned. It is the looking that will lead to finding. It is unrealistic to expect that we should find the answer before we have begun to look for it, although so many students expect exactly that.

As we get better at preventing our anxiety from taking control, we will experience increasing clarity during tests and better access to what we have learned.

In summary, yoga-thinking is, firstly, having a deeper awareness of how our thoughts and emotions occur, and secondly, choosing to influence our thinking *consciously*, rather than being carried along, oblivious, by its invisible current.

Yoga-thinking is the way we practice expressing our free choice's veto power. It can (and should) be applied in any area where we experience negative emotions that influence our thoughts, and therefore our actions. In Part 2 of this book, we will investigate it further with reference to many specific areas of our lives.

We think, therefore we can *yoga*-think.

REAL FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Benjamin Libet's work seems to accord well with our common experience. Instinctive brain processes motivate us to act one way or another for reasons of (perceived) self-preservation. Our ability to override these impulses, and even to *redirect* them, is the essence of evolving. The better we become at yoga-thinking, the more civilized and elevated we become.

Our impulses are hardwired into our system; we are born that way. The degree to which we are trained, as children, and molded to understand this thinking, and to be able to override it, is the degree to which we are guided in the right direction by our parents and teachers. (Assuming they were once guided in that way themselves.) During the rest of the journey, it falls on us to maintain and then perfect that override system, to evolve consciously throughout our lives.

We are wise, though, to remain aware of our deepest chemical motivations — our behavior engine, driven by fear. It simmers just beneath our surface, like magma beneath Yellowstone's volcanic hotspot, ready to burst through the surface and wreak havoc, if given the opening.

Real freedom of choice is therefore tied to our degree of evolution, that is, to how civilized our behavior is. *The more evolved we are, the more free our choices become*, and the less controlled they are by our unconscious chemistry — by our fear of death. The more afraid or 'enslaved' to conformity we are, the less we are able to choose freely, and the more we live by simply reacting to what happens around us. We fight to fit in by mirroring our group's fear-responses and by trying to minimize our sense of vulnerability. Emotional intelligence combined with emotional control allows us to see the shortcomings of fear-based conformity and to access (and hopefully *use*) our elusive free will.

This means that while everyone is capable of free will, many do not exercise it very often, or even at all.

We each only possess free will to the extent that we have control over our own emotional impulses. Put another way, freedom of choice and human sophistication *are* within our grasp, but they are not automatic, as we like to believe they are. We have to yoga-think in order to achieve them, and that takes intention and a little work.

Many do not attempt this work because they believe or have been taught that they are *already* there — that they are already evolved. But, given the state of humanity and the well-being of our planet, we are clearly still animals first and humans second.

THE OBEDIENCE EXPERIMENT

There is a famous and interesting psychology experiment that may offer support for our present concept — the emotional veto required for free will.

Those who have studied psychology will be familiar with the obedience experiment, performed in 1961 at Yale University by Stanley Milgram. It was not long after World War II, and his intent was to understand how so many German citizens could have been complicit with the Nazi regime.

In the experiment, the subject is told to administer a memory test to a ‘Learner,’ who they think is also a participant. The Learner is an actor, though, and is part of the experiment.

The subject had to agree, beforehand, that for every wrong answer the Learner gives them, they have to give the Learner an electric shock, and the strength of the shock will increase with every wrong answer. Unbeknownst to the subject, there is no actual electric shock taking place, but the actor playing the Learner plays his part well enough to convince the subject that there is. The act also includes begging and pleading, if necessary, for the subject to stop shocking them.

The experiment was designed to test whether people will continue causing pain to a stranger, even against their better judgment and values, if prompted to by an authority figure, in this case, a scientific researcher.

Before the experiment, experts and Yale students were asked what they thought the outcome would be. Just about all of them felt that only a tiny percentage of test subjects, perhaps 1% to 2%, would be capable of really hurting someone, of going all the way to the highest voltage setting.

Their predictions were wrong.

The experiment and its data have received some criticism, but it has been repeated many times and in many countries, with essentially the same

outcome. On average, over 60% of test subjects reached the highest voltage, even though many resisted at first, and even though they experienced symptoms of increasing stress and guilt while succumbing.

The subjects in Milgram's experiment were obviously Americans, not Germans. They were also not living under war-like conditions or under an evil regime, but even *they* succumbed to this 'just following orders' behavior.

Milgram explained: "Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation. Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority."⁴²

The outcome of the experiment seems to accord well with our model of instinctive thinking and behavior. It seems to prove that:

1. CONFORMING TO AUTHORITY:

People will conform to the wishes of an authority, even if it goes against their values or beliefs. Milgram believes it is because people without expertise will leave the decision making to those they perceive as the experts.⁴³ In my opinion, this conformity, like all conformity, comes from our insecurity and its (subconscious) fear of being wrong, of getting into trouble, of losing group approval, and then losing the safety of group belonging. This plays out subconsciously to the extent that the subject does not even realize that this is what they are doing.

2. SCIENCE = AUTHORITY:

People view scientific research as authoritative, and ultimately as good, in the long run.⁴⁴ This is also why people turn a blind eye to cruel and painful animal testing, in the name of progress, even though it is hard

⁴² S. Milgram, "The Perils of Obedience," Harper's Magazine (1974). Archived from the original on December 16, 2010.

⁴³ S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, London: Tavistock Publications (1974)

⁴⁴ R. Shiller, *Irrational Exuberance* (2nd ed.). Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press. (2005) p. 158.

to stomach. (Would *you* do it, *personally*?) In my opinion, this belief in ‘the experts’ or in their altruism is also a function of our survival instinct. If we believe that ‘they’ know and are in control, it makes us feel safe, especially if we feel that we, personally, do *not* know.

Milgram calls this giving up of autonomy to an authority the ‘agentic’ state.⁴⁵ I believe this is a description, not an explanation, of what is happening when we conform to authority. The explanation is the one given above for conformity — to ensure continued group-belonging, and therefore, safety and survival.

In my opinion, this experiment does *not* excuse the behavior of those who fell in line with authority and did the wrong thing. It merely demonstrates that our survival instinct determines our behavior. It does not evaluate dysfunction; it only understands fear versus safety.

Both the Milgram experiment and the Nazi Holocaust demonstrate this unfortunate truth about human biology and our survival instinct. If we do not veto our emotional impulses, we can end up doing far more frightful things than we would have believed ourselves capable of.

We *are* capable of it, though, unless and until we subvert our animal nature through a conscious act of choice, one that seeks to rise above our biological imperatives and our ever-present fear of death.

A free will choice.

2.2. RACISM

Racism is man's gravest threat to man — the maximum hatred for a minimum reason.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

A PRACTICAL RACE THEORY

Racism and bigotry — and the emotion of fear from which they emanate — are *instinctive*. They are biological survival imperatives.

Human beings are insecure, emotional, groupthinkers. Like all mammals, we are programmed to fear those who are different or foreign because they represent a possible threat to the security of our group.

That fear is the root of all prejudice and bigotry.

⁴⁵ M. Nissani, “A cognitive reinterpretation of Stanley Milgram’s observations on obedience to authority.” *American Psychologist*, 45(12), 1384–1385. (1990)

Obviously, being afraid of ‘different or foreign,’ when they *do* pose a threat, is not only appropriate but essential for the protection of the innocent in any civilized society. This fear becomes a problem, however, when perceived differences are actually trivial and do *not* represent any real threat. Unfortunately, people tend not to agree on what is and what is not a trivial threat.

Furthermore, if those around us espouse a certain view, social pressure and our need for conformity can move us to do likewise, whether or not we actually feel the same. This is motivated, not by the fear of ‘other,’ but by the fear of rejection by our *own* group.

Prejudice is therefore a defense mechanism that is programmed into human biology, and as we discussed in the previous chapter, so much of our lives are lived according to the promptings of our survival instinct.

Our emotions are our survival instinct’s alert system: negative emotions register a (perceived) threat; positive emotions signal safety. Emotions are neither logical nor calculated. They are instantaneous reactions to input from our surroundings. Our intellect does not inform our emotions; the *opposite* is true. Once emotions are aroused, our complex and creative rationalizations and justifications simply follow where the feelings are pointing.

Every decision we make is designed to make us feel safer. It is not designed to be right or wise.

Most of us live instinctively, but just about all of us are convinced that the opposite is true — that we are living with intention and choosing wisely and freely all the time. If that were true, though, our lives and world would not be filled with so much pain and dysfunction.

Against that backdrop, to the extent that people react instinctively, there will be fear of ‘other,’ and there will therefore be prejudice and racism against any minority, difference, or foreign influence that is present. We would therefore *expect* to see racism against minorities in any given corner of the globe — wherever human nature runs the show, and *to the extent* that it runs the show.

Racism and prejudice will not come from *everyone* in a given society, but it will certainly come from those who feel most instinctively insecure. It will also come from *both* sides of the political aisle. (Even if the prejudice may not be directed toward the same ‘other,’ both sides will feel equally justified in their view.)

Prejudice, racism, and bigotry are thus built into the ‘virtual reality meat suit’ that is the human body. We, as its pilots, have the task of recognizing such primal impulses within our nature and subverting them on

an intellectual level. This is, of course, possible, but it is certainly not automatic. It requires awareness, intention, and consistent effort.

To the extent that people *anywhere* strive to evolve beyond our primal fear-based groupthink, we will exhibit less racism and bigotry.

That is the simple and self-evident truth about prejudice and racism — though it may not be the most politically expedient.⁴⁶

WHAT RACISM IS *NOT*

Once we own our own humanness, it is simple to forgive others theirs.

David R. Hawkins

We must *not*, however, make the mistake of thinking that racism or prejudice are a defect of only one group of people, or of only one type of person. No race is inherently more or less racist than any other; no group is inherently more or less prejudiced than any other. We all have our shared humanity in common.

However, issues of relative culture, values, and demographics can certainly affect the vehemence of prejudice from one place to another or from one group to another. All cultures do *not* share equal values. This is self-evident.

Race is frequently used in politics — intentionally, and by both sides of the aisle — as a rhetorical football. Racism is not political, though. It is a universal human flaw, and we must see it for what it is. Ultimately — and ironically — it is no different, at its root level, from the prejudice we have against our political opponents.

There are many people, of all colors and cultures, who show no outward signs of racism. Examples include those who marry or who have close friendships across racial ‘lines.’ (They may nevertheless manifest other forms of prejudice.)

There are some societies in which this lack of racism is more pervasive or visible than others. But there are many in which the average human being lives according to the imperatives of their survival instinct. Such instinct will always harbor mistrust, dislike, or worse, toward *some* group, idea, or race — to *some* degree, even if it is only minimal.

This is one of the best arguments for us recognizing the truth of our instinctive thinking, so that we can work to elevate it. The extent to which

⁴⁶ We will address the topic of politics in chapter 10.

we are able to rein in our animal nature, to take the reins back from our animal in the mirror, is the extent to which we are evolving as individuals and as a planetary society.

The first step, though, is being aware of the necessity to do so!

REVENGE RACISM

When a minority has experienced racism or persecution at the hands of a certain majority, or vice versa, they may, in turn, become prejudiced against the entire offending group in response. While this is certainly understandable, ironically, it still remains a prejudice. This is because no stereotype and no single perspective can ever be true of *every* member of a racial or national group. (Small groups, or those who hold a hateful or a genocidal ideology, are a different matter, of course.)

Resentment and the desire for revenge are indeed powerful forces within the human condition, and history is full of examples of such 'pay-back.' Human nature, left to its own devices, will always cause history to repeat (and rhyme).

The goal of the evolving consciousness, however, is *not* to leave our nature to its own selfish and fearful devices. Luckily for us, history also has examples of people who have risen above their desire for revenge. As a South African, a poignant example of this would be Nelson Mandela. When he became president of South Africa, having been in prison for 27 years under the previous Apartheid regime, his vision for the future was one of forgiveness, unity, and peace. For most people, this is a path that requires a lot more courage than giving in to our lust for revenge.

MOVING BEYOND

It is essential that we not only recognize the evils of past and present forms of prejudice, but that we *understand* the biological imperatives within us that give rise to them. Only when we understand this can we choose to grow beyond our instinctive fears and groupthink, not to mention, to *forgive* those who have succumbed to theirs.

We can banish prejudice and racism from our lives and from our world if we teach our children, in every generation, the truth of the human machine. If they understand themselves better, they are empowered to make more evolved choices and live healthier and more conscious lives.

Overcoming prejudice and bigotry is a mark of evolution, a sign that we are beginning to control our instinct by asserting and living according to

reason. Reason dictates that we should recognize our commonalities: Our bodies all work the same way, medically, and we all want the same basic freedom and happiness for ourselves and for our families.

Of course, reason also dictates that, in a world where predatory actors remain, we still need to pre-judge and assess others in order to survive. We should certainly be striving to move ourselves and our broader society in a direction of increased civility, toward that Utopian dream, but we are also wise to acknowledge that we are not quite there yet.

As long as the world contains predatory actors, our survival will continue to necessitate a little groupthink, until the need to defend ourselves has diminished — across all of our global cultures — as a consequence of our behavioral evolution. It is important to recognize this self-evident truth, even as we work to connect and engage together.

Cooperation and safety are both enhanced when we understand the true source of our motivations, thoughts, and actions, and when we can be *honest* about them.

In order for us to evolve, we must first understand that our survival instinct is still running the show. Until we do, we will continue running around like animals, dividing ourselves into groups, congratulating ourselves on the superiority, brilliance, and correctness of our group... even as we continue to kill our 'enemies' and hurt the ones we love. And ourselves.

We can choose not to continue living this way. Instead, if we can successfully diminish our fears and grow together as a global community, the possibilities that lie before our exceptional human race are truly endless.

2.3. THE TRACE-BACK

So far, we have looked at our instinctive reactions in primarily one direction, asking 'how do our fear-based emotions affect our behavior?'

We can also look at this process in reverse. It involves analyzing an emotional impulse and tracing its cause back to our limbic brain, back to our amygdala's fear of death.

BODY-THINKING

Our default, reactionary thinking is not higher consciousness thinking, but rather what I call *body-thinking*. Being aware of when we are body-thinking is the first step to evolving our consciousness.

As we discussed in chapter 1, the emotions that fire in our amygdala come in one of two flavors: the *presence of fear* (which feels bad — *fight-or-flight*) or the *absence of fear* (which feels good — *stay-and-play*).

Anytime we are prompted to act from within, and especially when it comes along with a negative emotion, we are hearing from our survival instinct. In the moment of feeling, it is useful and instructive to be able to know which fear — which *flavor* of our fear of death — is tugging at our puppet strings. Only then do we have the ability to tug back in opposition. Only then can we choose whether to give in or to veto that impulse *consciously*, thereby reclaiming our free will.

THE TRACE-BACK

When we experience an emotional prompting from within, we should try to unmask the truth behind the impulse by asking ourselves:

- What is my underlying fear — my survival instinct — trying to get me to do here?
- How does this action represent greater safety to my subconscious?

The questions above are ones that we should all be able to answer for ourselves, with a little introspection and self-analysis. It is simply a matter of engaging in the process. If we find this too challenging on our own, we should seek help from a wise friend or confidant. (In Part 2 of this book, we will consider what the more conscious (or civilized) choices might look like, in various areas of our lives, if we are able to *choose* rather than simply react.)

If we become adept at seeing the true motivation behind our impulses to act, we have arrived at a greater degree of emotional intelligence. We then become capable of real and empowered freedom of choice.

We can use the trace-back to understand both our basic human tendencies, as well as our reactions to negative emotion.

BASIC TENDENCIES

Let us consider three examples of our most basic tendencies in order to clarify the concept: sex, marriage, and bullying. (For the sake of simplicity, we will use the heterosexual model in our examples.)

1. Sex:

When I see an attractive person, I experience a series of desires or drives as the following *instinctive* and *subconscious* conversation plays out:

I am attracted to that desirable person because...

- as a man,
 - I am motivated to have sex with her because I will feel pleasure, which will make me feel safe, in the short-term sense.
 - I am motivated to be dominant over her, which will make me feel safe in my strength and perceived power, in the short-term sense.
 - I am also subconsciously motivated to reproduce, so that my (and my species') survival will be assured. That will make my survival instinct feel successful, in the long-term sense, which will make me feel safe.
- as a woman,
 - I am motivated to have sex with him because I will feel pleasure,⁴⁷ which will make me feel safe, in the short-term sense.
 - I am motivated to seek security from a powerful or comforting man, which will make me feel safe, in the short-term sense. I am willing to submit to him, sexually, because the relationship will allow me (and my children) to feel protected.
 - I am also subconsciously motivated to reproduce, so that my (and my species') survival will be assured. That will make my survival instinct feel successful, in the long-term sense, which will make me feel safe.
- ... and my instinctive fears will be eased.

This subconscious conversation spells out the *reasons* that men and women are attracted to one another. It is not simply about the pleasure of sex. It is also a reflection of status, power, and survival.

The female animal offers sex in exchange for protection; the male animal offers protection in exchange for sex.

This trace-back clarifies why men are attracted to sexy women, even if the women do not share their values. It clarifies why women are attracted to rich or powerful men, even if the men are unattractive. It even explains why some women are attracted to the 'bad boy' — the alpha male. It is not that she likes rebellion, roughness, or even insensitivity. Her biology simply wants to feel safe, and she feels safest with a man whom she perceives as being strongest — who can best protect her. The rebellious man often tends to come off as the bravest or the strongest. (Even if he is also cruel or stupid.)

This kind of trace-back helps us clarify what our biological motivations are, in order that our consciousness can then choose to take over the leadership role. It does this by vetoing the animal's instinctive lead when it rears its head at an inappropriate time, or in a way that works against our

⁴⁷ That is, in a mutual and consensual setting, in which no one is hurt.

conscious evolution. (For more details on the instinct of sexuality, see chapter 7.)

2. Marriage:

In addition to the pleasurable benefits of sex, mentioned above, I get married because...

- I am motivated to have a companion in life, because their help and support makes me feel safer in a world of challenges and competition. Without this support, I will feel both lonely and vulnerable.
- I am subconsciously motivated to reproduce, so that my survival (and that of my species) will be assured. That will make my survival instinct feel successful, in the long-term sense, which will make me feel safe.
- I am motivated to start a family, in order to satisfy my community's expectations, which will make me feel safe in my conformity.
- ... and my instinctive fears are eased.

This does not mean to imply that getting married or having children are bad. They are essential to our survival, and also provide many benefits. We are wiser, though, when we recognize the powerful instinctive drives that these societal conventions satisfy within us. (For more details on the instinct of relationships and marriage, see chapter 8.)

3. Bullying:

I manipulate, insult, ostracize, or beat up on someone weaker, geekier, less intelligent, or less cool than I am, because...

- I need to feel like I and my group are the strongest, so I can feel safe in my strength.
- I need to instill fear in others so they do not try to challenge my position of strength, so I can continue to feel safe in my perceived strength.
- ... and my instinctive fears are eased.

When someone bullies, it is not a sign of strength but rather of insecurity — of weakness. A bully is so insecure that the only way they can feel safe is by hurting or subverting someone weaker.

The knowledge of this should be enough to embarrass any bully into self-improvement, and the rest of us into not rewarding them with our admiration — or our fear — for their cowardice. (For more details on the instinct of bullying, see Appendix 2.)

NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Let us now consider three more examples of common negative emotional reactions: feeling hurt, embarrassed, or insecure.

1. Hurt:

I feel hurt that someone disrespected or ignored me because...

- It implies that I am not in a strong or important position in my group, which my instinct interprets as making my place in the group less secure.
- This makes me feel vulnerable to being rejected by the group, which would leave me alone and unprotected, which I subconsciously believe sets me up for death.
- ... and this makes me feel unsafe.

2. Embarrassed:

I feel embarrassed that something personal or disparaging about me was discovered because...

- It means that people in my group might think less of me, which lowers my esteem in my group, which my instinct interprets as making my place in the group less secure.
- This makes me feel vulnerable to being rejected by the group, which would leave me alone and unprotected, which I subconsciously believe sets me up for death.
- ... and this makes me feel unsafe.

3. Insecure:

I feel insecure about an aspect of my appearance because...

- It means that people might like me less, which will make it more challenging to find a partner, easier to lose a partner, or it might make people not want to be around me.
- This will deprive me of the safety of companionship, sex, and procreation, which will leave my instinct unfulfilled in several areas.
- It may also lower my esteem in my group, which makes me feel vulnerable to being rejected by the group. That would leave me alone and unprotected, which I subconsciously believe sets me up for death.
- ... and this makes me feel unsafe.

Of course, none of these assessments are usually accurate, except in the myopic calculus of our frightened amygdala.

We are empowered, though, when we understand how our most primal forces operate in our lives. We are ‘unconscious’ when we simply go through the motions of life, reacting, justifying, and validating. If that is all we are doing, we give away far too much. We squander, at the very least, the opportunity to live *consciously*, because we are yielding control to the inner animal, to our mindless, fear-based, automatic pilot system.

Our lives and our world will only get better to the extent that we stop doing that.

* * *

In 2019, I gave a TEDx talk titled: “Emotional Wisdom and Real Freedom of Choice.”⁴⁸ It can be found on Youtube, on my website,⁴⁹ or by scanning the QR code below.



⁴⁸ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxtXGQe8f1Y> Video title: “Emotional Wisdom and Real Freedom of Choice | Arnie Benn”

⁴⁹ <https://www.arniebennbooks.com/media>

03. RESISTING THE CONCEPT

IN THIS CHAPTER:

3.1: RESISTANCE

- Cognitive Dissonance
- Bias: Our Instinct In Intellect's Clothing
- Our Flawed Perception
- Simple Ideas

3.2: HORSE & CONSCIOUS RIDER

- Analogy
- Conscious Evolution

* * *

3.1. RESISTANCE

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

Aristotle

Despite this proposed model, and the sources quoted above in support of it, we humans are still predisposed to reject (or at least mistrust) any ideas that are new or unfamiliar — especially if the ideas are critical of us or threaten to expose our vulnerabilities or undermine our beliefs. This model does just that because it reveals the many ways in which we react instinctively rather than choosing wisely.

Human beings resist change and new information because it upsets our equilibrium, which makes us feel vulnerable. That negative emotional response *proves* that we are feeling threatened or afraid of the unwelcome change, so we ignore or deny it, hoping the threat will go away and that we can go back to feeling like everything is fine. This is not a very logical or sensible approach; it is an instinctive and emotional one. (Of course, sometimes we are right to question because not everything we hear or read will be correct.)

When we are exposed to something we do not like, we will immediately search our mind for all the evidence we can muster against it. We do our best to discredit the unwelcome idea (or person) so that we can return to the comfort of the evidence that supports the side we like.

The sad truth is that we go even further than that. We do not approach new things in a neutral way to begin with. When we are exposed to something new or unexpected, whether or not it represents an inherent threat, we are predisposed to dislike, mistrust, or dismiss it because it is not familiar to *us*. It must therefore represent *them*. And in every case, our mind stands ready with a compelling justification for this dismissive thinking.

We humans do not see what is *there*, we see what we *want* to see. We do not look for fact or truth, we look for validation because that is what makes us feel safe. Our instinctive insecurity also needs the comfort of our group's dogma and the validation of their acceptance in order to feel safe. If we do not conform, we risk being rejected by the group and losing our sense of security. Our instinct is not willing to risk that, so we resist any idea or information that is different or new, that threatens to rock the boat.

This cognitive dissonance can even derail the objectivity of our best and brightest. Our greatest scientific innovators can succumb to its relentless emotional force, as did Einstein when he added the Cosmological Constant into his General Theory of Relativity,⁵⁰ a mistake that he later called the greatest blunder of his career.

BIAS: OUR INSTINCT IN INTELLECT'S CLOTHING

*What of the ox who loves his yoke and deems the elk and deer of
the forest stray and vagrant things?*

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

As we explore further into the details of this model, by delving into specific topics in the coming chapters, it is important that we are each capable of recognizing and acknowledging the places where our own biases might cloud our judgment or lead us into unwise or mistaken thinking. We would certainly be unwise *indeed* to imagine that we are above such erroneous thinking. (Such certainty would, in fact, all but ensure it.)

The question is not whether or not we are biased. All humans are biased. The question is how *badly* are we biased? And how blind are we to it?

The question is also not in which area we are biased. The question is in which area we are *not* biased, and that is also a difficult question to answer honestly.

Furthermore, the professions in which people are arguably the most prone to bias may, ironically, be journalism and science. This is precisely because these are meant to be arenas of fact, truth, and objectivity. Both journalists and scientists are therefore instinctively incentivized to believe that *they*, themselves, epitomize fact, truth, and objectivity. While they may be *capable* of it, to the extent that they master their instinctive, emotional impulses... who among us can make that claim?

If you are a journalist or a scientist and think you are unbiased, your bias has more than likely blinded you beyond the ability to be objective. The only remedy for this is to seek out that bias and acknowledge (and

⁵⁰ Einstein introduced this mathematical term into his equations based on a pre-existing belief in an unchanging universe. It allowed his calculations to show the universe as stable. He later abandoned the Cosmological Constant when evidence appeared to undermine it in favor of an expanding universe. Ironically, he may turn out to have been right in the first place — the universe may, in fact, be dynamically stable — even though he originally did it for the wrong reason.

confront) it, which takes courage, honesty, and humility. The difficulty is that it is challenging to remain humble when we are seen as an authority.

Our brain serves our survival. *All* of our brain. The outer executive layer of our brain (the cerebral cortex) is not separate from the body, the way we like to think of it. It does not stand alone, objective. It is the ‘frosting on the cake’ of the brain, the most powerful tool in the instinct’s arsenal, and it constitutes a brilliant survival spin machine. It desperately wants to reframe our situation into something positive because we have a deep-seated need to believe we are right — that we are in the right group, and therefore, that we are safe. We fear being wrong (or being in the wrong group) because, instinctively — subconsciously — we feel it sets us up for failure... that doorway to death. As long as we believe we are right, we can endure almost anything. The Milgram experiment appears to bear this out.

In almost every situation, our brain will spin the story to give *us* the benefit of the doubt and to place any criticism on *them*. We will criticize traits in others that are present in us, and we will criticize others for doing things that we do on a regular basis. Despite our intelligence as a species, our bias is just that blatantly blinding for most of us; we do it with a straight face.

Generally, we tend to believe that we are justified or ‘right’ about most (or all) of the things we believe. Obviously, though, none of us can be right about everything. That means we are all wrong about *something*, or even about many things. We usually cannot see the things we are wrong about, though, because our brain has an instinctive incentive to make us believe we are right about things, so that we feel safe.

That means *all of us are walking around believing we are right about things that we are actually wrong about*. And we cannot know *which* things they are because we believe we are right about *everything*.

Furthermore, we become even less capable of seeing our ‘wrongness’ when we feel strong emotion about an issue.

This unflattering truth should encourage us all toward compromise!

What is the reality instead? We choose the news channel we watch based on which one says what we like to hear. And when we hear things that validate our beliefs, we choose to believe that what we are hearing is objective, unbiased, and true.

We claim to watch this channel because we agree with their logic and reasoning, because they are correct, and because the other side’s media is just

plain wrong. But this is just another of our little self-deceptive strokes of the ego. Harmless, right? Would that it were so.

The brain's ability to rationalize is so powerful that a battered wife will stay with her abusive husband because the prospect of being alone is more terrifying to her survival instinct than the pain of physical assault. But is she consciously aware of this? It is so powerful that a religious zealot will convince himself it is justifiable to brutally murder a 'non-believer.'

If our choices were not motivated by fear and vulnerability, these types of situations would not be stereotypes. They would be the aberrations that they *should* be.

That they one day hopefully *will* be.

OUR FLAWED PERCEPTION

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

Henry David Thoreau

I always find it kind of funny that normal people are always saying autistic children "live in their own world." When you work with animals for a while you start to realize you can say the same thing about normal people.

Temple Grandin

Beyond our bias, our perception itself is not as accurate or complete as we like to think it is. We tend to believe that we see what is going on in our field of view, but that is not the case. What we see is affected by what we expect to see, what we want to see, or what is occupying our thoughts.

As Temple Grandin points out in her book, *Animals In Translation*, a simple demonstration of this selective perception can be found in a short video produced by researchers Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons.

(If you would like to try this experience, watch the following video before you read on: <https://bit.ly/theperceptiontest>.⁵¹)

⁵¹ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo> Video title: "selective attention test"

Participants were instructed to watch the video and count the number of passes made by a specific group of basketball players. As a result, most of them did not even notice when a man in a gorilla suit walked right through the middle of the players, stopping halfway to look into the camera. The gorilla suit is so glaringly obvious that, whoever has not been distracted by the ‘conditioning’ of the instructions, sees it right away.

Grandin reports on another experiment, performed by NASA, in which commercial pilots in a simulator were instructed to perform a series of landings. On some of the approaches, the simulation placed a large airplane parked on the runway. Fully one quarter of the pilots landed right on top of it, without recalling even having seen it.

These experiments show that we would be wise to approach what we think we perceive with a little humility. As this book seeks to underscore, this includes the ways in which we perceive our own motivations and emotions, not to mention the stories we make up about them in order to feel better.

SIMPLE IDEAS

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.

E.B. White

The ideas in this book are so simple and straightforward that your instinct’s best rejection theory might be that it is *too* simple, and that we are more complicated creatures now, more evolved. We might resist accepting the idea that our motivations could actually still be this primitive, this simplistic, this self-serving and divisive. Do we not see how often good people do good and in how many myriad ways, large and small?

However, a brief survey of history, even recent history, shows how often we also behave like animals, and not just nationally or internationally, but even locally. Even in our own homes. We react. We think with our emotions and we hurt ourselves and each other.

Overall, the world *has* improved over the ages, so we are by no means doomed by our nature. We could just be making much better progress, and since the stakes are getting higher on this planet, we *need* to evolve more quickly and efficiently for our own good. For our own safety and survival.

Every quantum leap in the evolution of human behavior needs a juicy realization — something that will henceforth always seem obvious, but that had not seemed so up to that point. One example is equality for women.

Since men are physically able to dominate women, they did throughout most of human history. In many cultures, though, men have managed to let go of *might-makes-right* and to concede equality to women. (Sadly, we are still waiting for a few to catch up.) This shift represents an advance in human attainment, a subjugation of our chemistry through an act of will, a sacrifice — declaring that physical strength is no longer the measure of one's humanity.

Another quantum leap is the bridging of racial, ethnic, or religious boundaries through intermarriage, or the societal acceptance of homosexuality — declaring that neither ethnicity nor sexual orientation are the measure of one's humanity.

These leaps in the evolution of our behavior are characterized by an acceptance or tolerance of differences between people, the kind of differences that had been cause for fear, conflict, hatred, or persecution before. This is simply because our instinct drives us to differentiate between people. Any difference, whether in superficial appearance, lifestyle, or ideas, represents a possible threat.

The next quantum leap must, at the very least, see our broader society gaining new clarity about our own nature. We must not only understand its propensity for doing harm in the name of soothing its fears, we must engage in the journey of evolving it — and therefore our society — *consciously*.

3.2. HORSE AND CONSCIOUS RIDER

ANALOGY

In this book, we will be delving into many issues relating to the idea of consciousness. As a stated goal, we are looking at how we might 'elevate our level of consciousness,' whatever that means exactly.

We will delve more deeply into the nature of consciousness in Part 3, but for now, and for the purposes of this discussion, we will assume that there *is* such a thing as consciousness, and that we humans all possess it.

Let us now introduce an analogy to describe our transition from Level 0 consciousness to Level 1 consciousness — the shift from unconscious animal to conscious human. It is an analogy that we will revisit.

Imagine that we are each, at our essence, a conscious awareness. Imagine that, when we are born, our awareness somehow melds with a body, by analogy, like a very young rider who is placed onto the back of a young horse. Imagine also that, like consciousness and body, the young

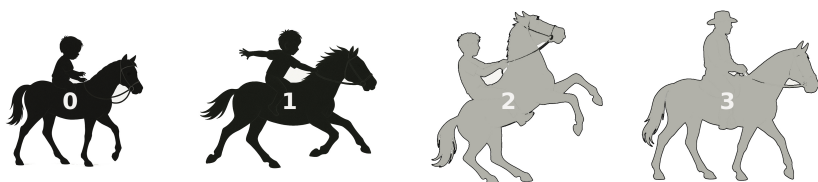
horse and its rider will be joined, just like this, never to be apart for the rest of their physical lives. This describes Level 0 consciousness — being alive.

Initially, and for many years, the horse simply runs away with its rider. The rider is too inexperienced and not physically strong enough to rein in the much more powerful animal. In fact, the rider has to hang on for dear life just to *survive*. This describes the human animal in the mirror's built-in behavioral engine.

Gradually, though, the rider will grow stronger and wiser. If they are paying attention, they can learn the ways of the horse and the bridle. Only then do they stand a chance of one day controlling it, of one day having the horse go where *they* want it to go, rather than the other way around.

CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION

Eventual mastery, however, is in no way guaranteed. The rider who does not understand that they are on a horse, or that they can even gain control, will not do any of the work needed to gain control, and they will therefore not develop as a rider. Their horse, though, growing ever stronger itself, will continue to run away with them for the rest of their mutual association in this world, and the rider will continue to think that this is normal.



The gateway to conscious evolution is, first and foremost, *knowing* how the human organism works. That has been the purpose of Part 1 of this book; it is the process of growing into what I call Level 1 consciousness. It means we are now aware that we are a *rider*, and that the animal has been doing most of the driving. It means we now understand that the animal can be both understood and better controlled.

We can be the *pilot*, and no longer just a passenger.

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