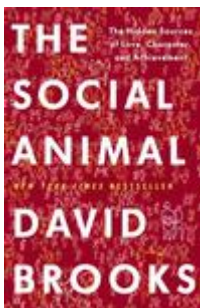


The Intuitive Animal

A review of



The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement

by David Brooks

New York, NY: Random House, 2011. 424 pp. ISBN 978-1-4000-6760-2 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-679-60393-1 (e-book). \$27.00



Reviewed by

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David Brooks is every liberal's favorite conservative writer: Affable, thoughtful, and balanced, he never fails to provoke reflective thought. He should also be every psychologist's favorite popular science writer. In his *New York Times* columns; in his books, including *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (2000) and its sequel, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense* (2004); and on his *Times*-sponsored blog, Brooks is an eager consumer of and promoter of social science, especially psychology, always trying to understand the implications of basic research for everyday life and public policy. He talks to us at conferences; he reads our journal articles. He pays attention to us as nobody else outside the field does. For this we all owe him a great debt of gratitude—even if, as in this book, his enthusiasms sometimes lead him astray.

Brooks's task in *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* is nothing less than to digest 30 years of research in cognitive, developmental, and social psychology, including all the latest trends: behavior genetics, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and cultural psychology—which, taken together, constitute an “intellectual revolution” (p. xi) in our understanding of consciousness and the role it plays in behavior. All of this is presented through the imagined lives of two highly successful individuals, Harold and Erica, who are born and raised, meet and marry, and, each in his or her own way, illustrate and exemplify the principles uncovered by this new body of research and theory.

Brooks has consciously modeled his book on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1760 novel *Emile*, which he wrote to illustrate his theories of education. That's a tough act to follow, and, as a writer of fiction, Brooks shouldn't give up his day job. The characters are a little wooden, the plot a little plodding. But if Harold and Erica sometimes seem like stereotypes, that's part of the point: Brooks is using their story to tell us what people are like in general; he doesn't have the novelist's intention to tell us what someone is like in particular. Brooks could have made these same points without the fictional overlay, but he is probably correct that the material wouldn't be quite so engaging for the typical reader. What matters is what Brooks tells his readers about psychology—and what we can learn from him about our field.

The book, then, stands or falls on its scientific content. In that respect, its themes are effectively summarized in a paragraph from one of Brooks's (2011) *Times* columns:

First, the unconscious parts of the mind are most of the mind, where many of the most impressive feats of thinking take place. Second, emotion is not opposed to reason; our emotions assign value to things and are the basis of reason. Finally, we are not individuals who form relationships. We are social animals, deeply interpenetrated with one another, who emerge out of relationships. (para. 7)

Brooks contends that these scientific findings constitute a refutation of the Enlightenment ideal of the individual reasoning his way through the world—at least the French Enlightenment ideal of Cartesian individual rationalism. Rather, he argues, science vindicates the view of the British Enlightenment, exemplified by Hume, in which reason is limited and subordinate to the “sentiments and affections” (Hume, 1748/2007, p. 70).

Brooks certainly got the third point right. With his title echoing Spinoza and Aristotle, if not Elliot Aronson (1972), Brooks insists that individual lives are embedded in a social context of other people, social institutions, and cultural forces. The interesting environment is the *social* environment, the interesting cognition is *social* cognition, and the most important human learning is *social* learning. That is why personality, the study of the individual, cannot be divorced from social psychology, which links individual mental structures and processes to social and cultural structures and processes. That is why psychology, the science of mind and behavior, is a *social* as well as a biological science.

With respect to the second point, Brooks is certainly onto something. It is one of the signal failures of our field that it largely ignored emotion until only just recently. For most of the 19th century, psychology was focused almost exclusively on problems of sensation and perception (itself a legacy, by the way, of the British Enlightenment). The Cannon–Bard theory (e.g., Cannon, 1932) encouraged us to define emotion solely in terms of undifferentiated physiological arousal in response to threat, and then radical behaviorism ruled emotion, as well as cognition, out of bounds altogether.

The cognitive revolution brought mind back into psychology, but it also viewed emotions as the products of cognitive appraisals, if not merely beliefs about our feelings. The result was that every department of psychology has a highly developed curriculum covering all aspects of cognition, but there is nothing comparable for emotion (or motivation, for that matter). That situation began to change in 1980, with an affective counterrevolution stirred in the early 1980s by the Zajonc–Lazarus debate. Brooks rightly draws attention to the new and provocative research that has resulted from psychology’s new interest in emotion.

But it is one thing to argue that emotion is an important aspect of mind and behavior, and another thing entirely to assert that emotion is primary or that it rules cognition (Brooks has Harold favorably quote Hume to Erica about reason as the slave of passion). Just because we do not have to decide that a new food is disgusting and just because emotional reaction plays a role in studies where reason has been rendered inoperable by experimental design, that does not mean that emotion rules. What we actually have evidence for is a more balanced view in which emotion is information for cognition, but cognition also regulates emotion. Nothing in the scientific literature supports the claim that reason is the slave of the passions.

It’s the first point however, that lies at the center of Brooks’s book. There is no question that the cognitive revolution brought about a revolution in our understanding of consciousness and the role it plays in our mental and behavioral economy. Psychologists now talk about unconscious mental life without embarrassment (well, maybe just a little). But Brooks’s view of the unconscious is at once both too restrictive and too expansive.

Too restrictive: For the most part, Brooks identifies the unconscious with automatic mental processes, which generate conscious thoughts, feelings, desires outside our conscious awareness and control. In this, he reflects an extremely popular view in psychology (Kihlstrom, 2008), territory already mined by Malcolm Gladwell (2005) in *Blink*.

But there is more to the unconscious than this. Sometimes, the thoughts themselves are outside our awareness, but nevertheless influence our experience, thought, and action. Brooks occasionally mentions implicit perception, memory, and learning, but not often enough for them to make it into the index. Brooks does briefly discuss “implicit associations” that reveal that “90 percent of test-takers” harbor unconscious biases with respect to race, age, and other social categories (p. 238). But he gives no sense of just how controversial this particular proposition is.

Too expansive: Brooks includes in the domain of the unconscious a lot of influences on mind and behavior that should not count as unconscious at all because they do not refer to mental states and processes that could be conscious. These include our evolutionary heritage, various genetic predispositions, the hormones that flow through our bloodstreams, and the neurotransmitters that pass across our synapses. But psychologically speaking, it only makes sense to label something as *unconscious* something that could also be *conscious*. It makes no more sense to call genetic influences unconscious than it does to call the operation of gravity unconscious.

Brooks's list of unconscious influences also includes various aspects of social learning in which knowledge, expectations, beliefs, attitudes, and interests are transmitted from the group to the individual, from parent to child, from older to younger siblings, and from one person to another. But just because a lot of this learning occurs incidentally doesn't mean that it is unconscious in any technical sense; and a lot of it might be quite conscious—learning by precept and deliberate hypothesis testing as well as by modeling and example.

Brooks's list of unconscious influences also includes emotion. This is a little paradoxical because, in ordinary language, the very essence of emotion is that it is felt. In fact, though, Brooks is mostly talking about unconscious processes that generate conscious emotion. We may consciously feel that we like or dislike something without knowing why, precisely because our feelings are automatically elicited by various stimuli, which generate various bodily reactions, whose perception results in a feeling that only later feeds into the cognitive system of rational decision making.

Brooks's emphasis on intuition is related to his emphasis on emotion: We may feel that something is true, or right, without knowing why we feel that way. Here, there appears to have been a true revolution in consciousness (Myers, 2002). It was not too long ago, after all, that psychologists advised us that our intuitions were unreliable because they were influenced by a host of confounding heuristics and biases. But now, in the wake of the affective counterrevolution, we are told that these "gut feelings" are okay after all, and even preferable to deliberate, conscious reasoning—not least because they represent emotional, rather than rational, bases for judgment and decision making.

The first mistake here is to conflate the intuitive with the emotional. Some intuitions may represent gut feelings; but in other instances, you can almost feel the synapses firing in your cerebral cortex. There is nothing necessarily emotional about them. The second mistake is to elevate the emotional and the intuitive over the rational. Intuitions, like emotions, can be tools for reason, for judgment and decision making; but nothing in the research suggests that they should have pride of place.

Brooks's emphasis on emotion and intuition brings us full circle because both our feelings and our intuitions are the products of mental processes that operate unconsciously and automatically. Even within the narrow confines of the automaticity literature, Brooks relies on research that, all too often, uses very loose operational definitions. All too often,

automaticity is merely assumed or used to characterize processing that is merely incidental. That laboratory subjects do something that they were not specifically instructed to do by the experimenter does not necessarily mean that they did it automatically and unconsciously.

Moreover, most of the research that Brooks cites boils down to demonstration experiments showing that automatic processing plays some role in experience, thought, and action. Hardly any investigators actually compare the influence of automatic and controlled processes on performance; when they do, they find nothing like an imbalance favoring automaticity, except under laboratory conditions of uncertain ecological validity. It should come as no surprise that responses occurring within half a second of a stimulus are mediated by automatic processes. That is true almost by definition.

The idea of cold, dry rationality being supplanted by warm, moist (hot, wet?) emotion and intuition is an old one. That is why the 18th-century Enlightenment was followed by 19th-century Romanticism and why Freudian psychoanalysis appealed so much to 20th-century culture. With its emphasis on the hidden, sometimes primeval sources of our conscious experience, thought, and action, and on the dominance of emotion and intuition, Brooks's view of human nature borders on the Romantic. It has deeper connections to the French Enlightenment—closer to the Rousseau of the “noble savage”—than he might care to admit.

Which is all right if it's true. But it is not true—or, at least, it is not as true as Brooks and his informants think it is. Brooks cannot be held to account because of the infectious enthusiasms of his scientific informants. But, reading his account of our work, we might well ask ourselves whether this is really the view of human nature that is given by our science—and if not, why so many of us say it is.

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