

STORIES ABOUT THE MIND

Harold is a fictional character, less famous than Tom Sawyer or James Bond perhaps, but important in a different way because he is the hero in a book by David Brooks called *The Social Animal*. The book's subtitle is *The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*. It enjoyed best-seller status in 2012.

Harold didn't have a second name and he shares something else with the Jean-Jacques Rousseau character, *Emile*, in that the authors tell the story of an imaginary person's life as a framework for a serious dissertation. Rousseau lectured on education whereas Brooks draws together a lot of recent research on psychology and neuroscience using the details of Harold's life and that of his parents and his partner, Erica, as practical illustrations.

This is an important book because, being a political journalist for major newspapers in the USA, David Brooks has been able to get across the idea that political policies are 'shaped by shallow views of human nature' and that people in government and other institutions need to catch up with the advances in social neuroscience to correct this. He is described as a 'moderate conservative' and he said in a public lecture that his wife thought that his writing a book about emotions was a bit like Mahatma Gandhi writing a cookbook!

The threefold message in David Brooks' book that I am taking up here is that (1) emotion is the foundation of reason, not something separate, (2) the story that our conscious mind tells was mostly written in our subconscious, and (3) we become the individuals we are as a consequence of our relationships. Not long ago brain function was explained in terms of the individual, but now the brain is regarded as 'a social organ constructed through experience.'

Every book about the mind is actually a story told by the author even if it is totally 'objective,' that is it speaks about the mind as something separate from our experience of it. This book is an overview so it draws from the research findings and published opinions of many accomplished authors whom I will portray as characters, both minor and major, in my story. A few I have met personally; I've only read about others. My thinking owes a lot to their words which I don't want to plagiarise, but I take full responsibility for the way I have incorporated their ideas into my story.

Most books about emotions and the mind are written by neuroscientists and they hone in on the brain as the centre and source of the mind. This is only to be expected because we all know that damage to the brain mucks up your mind and most of the research is about that remarkable organ - the most complex and powerful kilogram and a half of anything known to man.

Quite a few of these authors, including very famous people (one a Nobel prize winner), are certain that the mind can be explained entirely in terms of the chemical processes in the cells of the brain. They will not be characters in my story because I do not subscribe to a totally materialistic view of our experience. I believe there must be other elements that can't be measured or described that play a part in our wondrous experience of life and mind. I refer to these simply as the unknown or the spiritual component of our mind. I think the story of the mind really is a 'never-ending story.'

Anyway, we don't ponder brain physiology as we think and feel and relate to other people. As the American poet Muriel Rukeyser reminded us, life does not seem to consist of atoms and molecules; it consists of stories from which arise feelings, thoughts and actions. We have a craving in these stories to explain how and why something happened so I need to explain some

brain processes, but I do so with the understanding that these exciting new ‘facts’ are also just part of an unfolding and unfinished, multi-author story being told about the mind.

There is another way in which stories are actually foundational elements of our mind. Mark Turner, for example, in his influential 1996 book *The Literary Mind - The Origins of Thought and Language*, referred to narrative imagining as the fundamental instrument of thought upon which all our rational capacities depend. It is the way we predict, plan and explain. I will be speaking about the brain as a story-making organ and suggesting that the meanings we generate with our mind are created and held together in the form of stories.

When you ask your friend how she feels - unless the answer is one syllable and the conversation ends there - she will tell you a little story. The car had a flat tyre, she missed the train and then it started raining and the taxi driver put her out in a puddle; it's a wonder she got here at all! Although she describes details of what happened, this is all about her feelings. A man might be more prosaic in his description to make it sound more objective, but he will also be talking about his feelings.

We place great importance on our thoughts, partly because our culture has come to privilege the rational mind over the emotional mind, believing it to be more reliable. Reason and emotion were separated in our thinking a long time ago as our idea of mind became separated from the body. It also seems easier and preferable in many ways to explain things and organise things in simple objective terms without having to worry about messy feelings. But this shallowness encourages selfish and short-sighted behaviour, weakens the emotional bonds between us, and leads to bad policies, even to quite ridiculous bureaucratic decisions.

David Brooks described some of these anomalies in his book. One example is the way Harold was schooled in all sorts of cognitive memory tasks, but not in his most important educational challenge, the emotional learning of socialisation. He had to teach that to himself. In the end Harold did attain the achievement, character and love he dearly needed in his life because he came to see it not as a ‘chess match played by reasoning machines’ but as a ‘never-ending interpenetration of souls.’

Disregarding the powerful influence that emotions have on the operation of our mind has its most far-reaching effects on our interpersonal relationships. In this book we will explore the physiology, psychology and behaviour of social engagement because this is so crucial for our individual wellbeing. To the extent that we feel separated from one another and from the natural world around us we suffer and our community fails to thrive.

The story about the mind has changed enormously just in the last decade, although the seeds of something new were sown a lot earlier. Descriptions of mind are no longer confined to the purely rational; they include the subconscious levels of emotional processing that shape and direct our reasoning process. This does not exclude the so-called executive function whereby thinking keeps in check some of our more primitive impulses, but it adds to it the complementarity of an intuitive sense coming from the emotional framework that is in the subconscious. The whole business of mind is tied together in our personal experience by feelings.