

THE SOCIAL ANIMAL by David Brooks

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS THE HAPPIEST STORY YOU'VE EVER READ. IT'S ABOUT two people who led wonderfully fulfilling lives. They had engrossing careers, earned the respect of their friends, and made important contributions to their neighborhood, their country, and their world.

And the odd thing was, they weren't born geniuses. They did okay on the SAT and IQ tests and that sort of thing, but they had no extraordinary physical or mental gifts. They were fine-looking, but they weren't beautiful. They played tennis and hiked, but even in high school they weren't star athletes, and nobody would have picked them out at that young age and said they were destined for greatness in any sphere. Yet they achieved this success, and everyone who met them sensed that they lived blessed lives

How did they do it? They possessed what economists call noncognitive skills, which is the catchall category for hidden qualities that can't be easily counted or measured, but which in real life lead to happiness and fulfillment.

First, they had good character. They were energetic, honest, and dependable. They were persistent after setbacks and acknowledged their mistakes. They possessed enough confidence to take risks and enough integrity to live up to their commitments. They tried to recognize their weaknesses, atone for their sins, and control their worst impulses.

Just as important, they had street smarts. They knew how to read people, situations, and ideas. You could put them in front of a crowd, or bury them with a bunch of reports, and they could develop an intuitive

feel for the landscape before them—what could go together and what would never go together, what course would be fruitful and what would never be fruitful. The skills a master seaman has to navigate the oceans, they had to navigate the world.

Over the centuries, zillions of books have been written about how to succeed. But these tales are usually told on the surface level of life. They describe the colleges people get into, the professional skills they acquire, the conscious decisions they make, and the tips and techniques they adopt to build connections and get ahead. These books often focus on an outer definition of success, having to do with IQ, wealth, prestige, and worldly accomplishments.

This story is told one level down. This success story emphasizes the role of the inner mind—the unconscious realm of emotions, intuitions, biases, longings, genetic predispositions, character traits, and social norms. This is the realm where character is formed and street smarts grow.

We are living in the middle of a revolution in consciousness. Over the past few years, geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and others have made great strides in understanding the building blocks of human flourishing. And a core finding of their work is that we are not primarily the products of our conscious thinking. We are primarily the products of thinking that happens below the level of awareness.

The unconscious parts of the mind are not primitive vestiges that need to be conquered in order to make wise decisions. They are not dark caverns of repressed sexual urges. Instead, the unconscious parts of the mind are most of the mind—where most of the decisions and many of the most impressive acts of thinking take place. These submerged processes are the seedbeds of accomplishment.

In his book, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Timothy D. Wilson of the University of Virginia writes that the human mind can take in 11 million pieces of information at any given moment. The most generous estimate is that people can be consciously aware of forty of these. “Some researchers,” Wilson notes, “have gone so far as to suggest that the unconscious mind does virtually all the work and that conscious will may

be an illusion.” The conscious mind merely confabulates stories that try to make sense of what the unconscious mind is doing of its own accord.

Wilson and most of the researchers I’ll be talking about in this book do not go so far. But they do believe that mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness organize our thinking, shape our judgments, form our characters, and provide us with the skills we need in order to thrive. John Bargh of Yale argues that just as Galileo “removed the earth from its privileged position at the center of the universe,” so this intellectual revolution removes the conscious mind from its privileged place at the center of human behavior. This story removes it from the center of everyday life. It points to a deeper way of flourishing and a different definition of success.

The Empire of Emotion

This inner realm is illuminated by science, but it is not a dry, mechanistic place. It is an emotional and an enchanted place. If the study of the conscious mind highlights the importance of reason and analysis, study of the unconscious mind highlights the importance of passions and perception. If the outer mind highlights the power of the individual, the inner mind highlights the power of relationships and the invisible bonds between people. If the outer mind hungers for status, money, and applause, the inner mind hungers for harmony and connection—those moments when self-consciousness fades away and a person is lost in a challenge, a cause, the love of another or the love of God.

If the conscious mind is like a general atop a platform, who sees the world from a distance and analyzes things linearly and linguistically, the unconscious mind is like a million little scouts. The scouts careen across the landscape, sending back a constant flow of signals and generating instant responses. They maintain no distance from the environment around them, but are immersed in it. They scurry about, interpenetrating other minds, landscapes, and ideas.

These scouts coat things with emotional significance. They come across an old friend and send back a surge of affection. They descend into a dark cave and send back a surge of fear. Contact with a beautiful

landscape produces a feeling of sublime elevation. Contact with a brilliant insight produces delight, while contact with unfairness produces righteous anger. Each perception has its own flavor, texture, and force, and reactions loop around the mind in a stream of sensations, impulses, judgments, and desires.

These signals don't control our lives, but they shape our interpretation of the world and they guide us, like a spiritual GPS, as we chart our courses. If the general thinks in data and speaks in prose, the scouts crystallize with emotion, and their work is best expressed in stories, poetry, music, image, prayer, and myth.

I am not a touchy-feely person, as my wife has been known to observe. There is a great, though apocryphal, tale about an experiment in which middle-aged men were hooked up to a brain-scanning device and asked to watch a horror movie. Then they were hooked up and asked to describe their feelings for their wives. The brain scans were the same—sheer terror during both activities. I know how that feels. Nonetheless, if you ignore the surges of love and fear, loyalty and revulsion that course through us every second of every day, you are ignoring the most essential realm. You are ignoring the processes that determine what we want; how we perceive the world; what drives us forward; and what holds us back. And so I am going to tell you about these two happy people from the perspective of this enchanted inner life.

My Goals

I want to show you what this unconscious system looks like when it is flourishing, when the affections and aversions that guide us every day have been properly nurtured, the emotions properly educated. Through a thousand concrete examples, I am going to try to illustrate how the conscious and unconscious minds interact, how a wise general can train and listen to the scouts. To paraphrase Daniel Patrick Moynihan from another context, the central evolutionary truth is that the unconscious matters most. The central humanistic truth is that the conscious mind can influence the unconscious.

I'm writing this story, first, because while researchers in a wide vari-

ety of fields have shone their flashlights into different parts of the cave of the unconscious, illuminating different corners and openings, much of their work is done in academic silos. I'm going to try to synthesize their findings into one narrative.

Second, I'm going to try to describe how this research influences the way we understand human nature. Brain research rarely creates new philosophies, but it does vindicate some old ones. The research being done today reminds us of the relative importance of emotion over pure reason, social connections over individual choice, character over IQ, emergent, organic systems over linear, mechanistic ones, and the idea that we have multiple selves over the idea that we have a single self. If you want to put the philosophic implications in simple terms, the French Enlightenment, which emphasized reason, loses; the British Enlightenment, which emphasized sentiments, wins.

Third, I'm going to try to draw out the social, political, and moral implications of these findings. When Freud came up with his conception of the unconscious, it had a radical influence on literary criticism, social thinking, and even political analysis. We now have a more accurate conception of the unconscious. But these findings haven't yet had a broad impact on social thought.

Finally, I'm going to try to help counteract a bias in our culture. The conscious mind writes the autobiography of our species. Unaware of what is going on deep down inside, the conscious mind assigns itself the starring role. It gives itself credit for performing all sorts of tasks it doesn't really control. It creates views of the world that highlight those elements it can understand and ignores the rest.

As a result, we have become accustomed to a certain constricted way of describing our lives. Plato believed that reason was the civilized part of the brain, and we would be happy so long as reason subdued the primitive passions. Rationalist thinkers believed that logic was the acme of intelligence, and mankind was liberated as reason conquered habit and superstition. In the nineteenth century, the conscious mind was represented by the scientific Dr. Jekyll while the unconscious was the barbaric Mr. Hyde.

Many of these doctrines have faded, but people are still blind to the

way unconscious affections and aversions shape daily life. We still have admissions committees that judge people by IQ measures and not by practical literacy. We still have academic fields that often treat human beings as rational utility-maximizing individuals. Modern society has created a giant apparatus for the cultivation of the hard skills, while failing to develop the moral and emotional faculties down below. Children are coached on how to jump through a thousand scholastic hoops. Yet by far the most important decisions they will make are about whom to marry and whom to befriend, what to love and what to despise, and how to control impulses. On these matters, they are almost entirely on their own. We are good at talking about material incentives, but bad about talking about emotions and intuitions. We are good at teaching technical skills, but when it comes to the most important things, like character, we have almost nothing to say.

My Other Purpose

The new research gives us a fuller picture of who we are. But I confess I got pulled into this subject in hopes of answering more limited and practical questions. In my day job I write about policy and politics. And over the past generations we have seen big policies yield disappointing results. Since 1983 we've reformed the education system again and again, yet more than a quarter of high-school students drop out, even though all rational incentives tell them not to. We've tried to close the gap between white and black achievement, but have failed. We've spent a generation enrolling more young people in college without understanding why so many don't graduate.

One could go on: We've tried feebly to reduce widening inequality. We've tried to boost economic mobility. We've tried to stem the tide of children raised in single-parent homes. We've tried to reduce the polarization that marks our politics. We've tried to ameliorate the boom-and-bust cycle of our economies. In recent decades, the world has tried to export capitalism to Russia, plant democracy in the Middle East, and boost development in Africa. And the results of these efforts are mostly disappointing.

The failures have been marked by a single feature: Reliance on an overly simplistic view of human nature. Many of these policies were based on the shallow social-science model of human behavior. Many of the policies were proposed by wonks who are comfortable only with traits and correlations that can be measured and quantified. They were passed through legislative committees that are as capable of speaking about the deep wellsprings of human action as they are of speaking in ancient Aramaic. They were executed by officials that have only the most superficial grasp of what is immovable and bent about human beings. So of course they failed. And they will continue to fail unless the new knowledge about our true makeup is integrated more fully into the world of public policy, unless the enchanted story is told along with the prosaic one.

The Plan

To illustrate how unconscious abilities really work and how, under the right circumstances, they lead to human flourishing, I'm going to walk, stylistically, in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In 1760 Rousseau completed a book called *Emile*, which was about how human beings could be educated. Rather than just confine himself to an abstract description of human nature, he created a character named Emile and gave him a tutor, using their relationship to show how happiness looks in concrete terms. Rousseau's innovative model allowed him to do many things. It allowed him to write in a way that was fun to read. It allowed him to illustrate how general tendencies could actually play out in individual lives. It drew Rousseau away from the abstract and toward the concrete.

Without hoping to rival Rousseau's genius, I'm borrowing his method. To illustrate how the recent scientific findings play out in real life, I've created two major characters—Harold and Erica. I use these characters to show how life actually develops. The story takes place perpetually in the current moment, the early twenty-first century, because I want to describe different features of the way we live now, but I trace their paths from birth to learning, friendship to love, work to wisdom,

and then to old age. I use them to describe how genes shape individual lives, how brain chemistry works in particular cases, how family structure and cultural patterns can influence development in specific terms. In short, I use these characters to bridge the gap between the sort of general patterns researchers describe and the individual experiences that are the stuff of real life.

Fellowship

Harold and Erica matured and deepened themselves during the course of their lives. That's one reason why this story is such a happy one. It is a tale of human progress and a defense of progress. It is about people who learn from their parents and their parents' parents, and who, after trials and tribulations, wind up committed to each other.

Finally, this is a story of fellowship. Because when you look deeper into the unconscious, the separations between individuals begin to get a little fuzzy. It becomes ever more obvious that the swirls that make up our own minds are shared swirls. We become who we are in conjunction with other people becoming who they are.

We have inherited an image of ourselves as *Homo sapiens*, as thinking individuals separated from the other animals because of our superior power of reason. This is mankind as Rodin's thinker—chin on fist, cogitating alone and deeply. In fact, we are separated from the other animals because we have phenomenal social skills that enable us to teach, learn, sympathize, emote, and build cultures, institutions, and the complex mental scaffolding of civilizations. Who are we? We are like spiritual Grand Central stations. We are junctions where millions of sensations, emotions, and signals interpenetrate every second. We are communications centers, and through some process we are not close to understanding, we have the ability to partially govern this traffic—to shift attention from one thing to another, to choose and commit. We become fully ourselves only through the ever-richening interplay of our networks. We seek, more than anything else, to establish deeper and more complete connections.

And so before I begin the story of Harold and Erica, I want to intro-

duce you to another couple, a real couple, Douglas and Carol Hofstadter. Douglas is a professor at Indiana University, and he and Carol were very much in love. They'd throw dinner parties and then afterward, they would wash the dishes together and relive and examine the conversations they had just had.

Then Carol died of a brain tumor, when their kids were five and two. A few weeks later, Hofstadter came upon a photograph of Carol. Here's what he wrote in his book, *I Am a Strange Loop*:

I looked at her face and looked so deeply that I felt I was behind her eyes and all at once I found myself saying, as tears flowed, "That's me! That's me!" And those simple words brought back many thoughts that I had had before, about the fusion of our souls into one higher-level entity, about the fact that at the core of both our souls lay our identical hopes and dreams for our children, about the notion that those hopes were not separate or distinct hopes but were just one hope, one clear thing that defined us both, that welded us into a unit, the kind of unit I had but dimly imagined before being married and having children. I realized that though Carol had died, that core piece of her had not died at all, but that it had lived on very determinedly in my brain.

The Greeks used to say we suffer our way to wisdom. After his wife's death, Hofstadter suffered his way toward an understanding, which as a scientist he confirms every day. The essence of that wisdom is that below our awareness there are viewpoints and emotions that help guide us as we wander through our lives. These viewpoints and emotions can leap from friend to friend and lover to lover. The unconscious is not merely a dark, primitive zone of fear and pain. It is also a place where spiritual states arise and dance from soul to soul. It collects the wisdom of the ages. It contains the soul of the species. This book will not try to discern God's role in all this. But if there is a divine creativity, surely it is active in this inner soulsphere, where brain matter produces emotion, where love rewires the neurons.

The unconscious is impulsive, emotional, sensitive, and unpredictable. It has its shortcomings. It needs supervision. But it can be brilliant. It's capable of processing blizzards of data and making daring creative leaps. Most of all, it is also wonderfully gregarious. Your unconscious, that inner extrovert, wants you to reach outward and connect. It wants you to achieve communion with work, friend, family, nation, and cause. Your unconscious wants to entangle you in the thick web of relations that are the essence of human flourishing. It longs and pushes for love, for the kind of fusion Douglas and Carol Hofstadter shared. Of all the blessings that come with being alive, it is the most awesome gift.