

Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2010. 9(2): 200-203

Book Review

And a Machiavellian Spin Doctor Shall Lead Them from the Spotlight of the Cartesian Theater

A review of Robert Kurzban, *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2010, 274 pp., US\$27.95, ISBN 978-0-691-14674-4 (hardcover).

Robert D. Mather, Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK. Email: rmather@uco.edu (Corresponding author).

Ashalee C. Hurst, Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK. Email: ahurst1@uco.edu.

When conceptualizing the “mind,” E.O. Wilson stated, “It throws a spotlight on those portions of the world it must know in order to live to the next day, and surrenders the rest to darkness” (1998, p. 105). Consciousness, from this perspective, can be thought of as what is in a spotlight. Conscious thought consists of what is in the “spotlight” of attention, and unconscious thought consists of the stagehands, set builders, truck drivers, and everything else that comes together in the process of creating a play. Indeed, the spotlight is not a perfect circle—it fades in the borders on the stage and some things may not appear to be completely in or out of the spotlight. Our metaphor is similar to Dennett’s (1991) characterization of the traditional model of consciousness as the “Cartesian Theater” (p. 17). The exception is that in our metaphor, the spotlight is part of the play. But who is running the spotlight? Are we back to an infinite regression of homunculi?

Tooby and Cosmides (1992) suggested that “the human mind consists of a set of evolved information-processing mechanisms instantiated in the human nervous system” and “many of these mechanisms are functionally specialized to produce behavior that solves particular adaptive problems, such as mate selection, language acquisition, family relations, and cooperation” (p. 24). This is sometimes called the Swiss Army Knife metaphor of the mind (Kenrick, Sadalla, and Keefe, 1998). Steven Pinker (1997) stated that “The mind is organized into modules or mental organs, each with a specialized design that makes it an expert in one arena of interaction with the world” (p. 21). As noted by Hendrick (1995, 2005), these modules are functional metaphors (as with most of psychology’s major concepts) that do not imply a specific physical center.

Robert Kurzban resurrects the idea of the modular brain with a series of very compelling arguments. The fundamental idea put forth by Kurzban is that “self” as we

conceive it is actually a module that serves as a press secretary for the other modules. That is, we have a multitude of adaptive modules that are represented by one module in charge of communicating with other people and reviewing information. This press secretary module can solicit other modules for information or ignore modules to establish plausible deniability. He describes this module as a “Machiavellian spin doctor” (p. 61) that communicates information for the good of the aggregated modules. Niccolo Machiavelli, author of *The Prince* and *The Discourses* (1527/1950), was renowned for his skills of political manipulation and understanding of social cognition. Thus, the Machiavellian spin doctor seeks to present information in its own self interest.

Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite proposes ideas that should change the way to view all constructs related to the self and initiate a dialogue with very important ideas that are relevant to all psychological researchers who study the slippery concept of the self. With the modular view, the boundaries of the self must be expanded. Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed an idea of possible selves, and Higgins (1996) proposed the ideal, ought, and actual selves. These theories of multiple selves might be based on accessibility of information in different modules to the press secretary module. Kurzban’s notion that, “It is clear that the modular design of the human mind guarantees hypocrisy” (p. 205) uses a lack of congruency among thoughts and behaviors to fortify his position of a modular brain. Results of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and Heider’s Balance Theory (Heider, 1958) could be revisited from a perspective of cognitive accessibility in the context of different brain modules.

According to Kurzban, one job of the press secretary module is impression management (i.e., maintaining a positive public image). Consequently, our press secretary module is activated when dealing with the public. We are better off if other people think highly of our traits and abilities (others may help in our time of need if they think we’ll help them in their time of need), and the press secretary may only have access to filtered information so as to ensure that the information transmitted to the public is positively biased. This may account for some of people’s inaccurate and hypocritical beliefs and behaviors. However, our press secretary is not the only module that influences beliefs and behaviors.

Recall some of the classic research on misattribution. Dutton and Aron (1974) found that male participants who crossed a “scary” bridge did not attribute their arousal to the scary bridge, but rather, attributed their arousal from the bridge to arousal from an attractive, female experimenter. It’s as if they thought, “My heart’s pounding, my knees are buckling, and my palms are sweaty—I guess I’m really into that girl.” Looking at the situation from a modular brain framework, one can interpret the results in a way that points out the benefits of attributing arousal to a potential mate (i.e., reproductive benefits) rather than attributing arousal to a bridge. Thus, the module responsible for reproduction may have taken the lead in that situation, leaving the module responsible for identification of danger hidden beneath awareness.

A similar case can be made for results found by Schachter and Singer (1962) while investigating misattribution of arousal. When participants were given a shot of adrenaline, but were not informed of the shot’s arousing properties, they attributed their feelings of arousal to happy or sad interactions they had with a confederate. Perhaps, the situation activated the module in charge of interpreting social stimuli and thus, pushed those thoughts to the forefront of the mind. Accurate identification of arousal may be less

conducive to survival (in this particular context) than focusing on social cues (Mather, 2007).

There are times when ignorance of the true cause of behavior may serve us better than accurate knowledge. This idea, which Kurzban points out several times within the text, was termed strategic ignorance. In some situations, it may be beneficial for humans to be ill-informed, such as in the case of the scary bridge. If a person attributes his arousal to an attractive woman instead of a scary bridge, that inaccurate attribution could result in reproductive benefits (e.g., he could express interest in the woman, she could reciprocate, and this could result in offspring). If, on the other hand, the person accurately attributed his arousal to the scary bridge, resulting behavior may be less beneficial (e.g., he could choose to avoid scary bridges for the rest of his life and avoid death by falling off a scary bridge, but this wouldn't directly promote reproduction).

Kurzban also suggests that our brains were not designed to seek the truth in all possible situations. In fact, he proposes that some information isn't useful, and the act of seeking that information may be a waste of time. In other words, sometimes, excessive information provides no (or minimal) benefit and our energy may be better spent on other tasks. Take, for example, the grueling waiting period prospective graduate students have after submitting applications to PhD. programs. For many, not knowing their outcome is the worst part of the process. So what do these Ph. D. hopefuls do in their spare time? They log onto internet forums where other people submit their admissions results from schools. Through these forums, prospective PhD. students can learn if other people have been rejected, waitlisted, interviewed, or accepted from specific programs. Perhaps this process helps to pass the time, but the extra information about schools' admissions decisions does not change anything about a student's current situation. The knowledge that other people have already been accepted into a program does not help the person who has heard nothing from the same program. However, people continue to log onto these types of forums. The point is, extra information, no matter how accurate the information, is not always beneficial.

Having the ability to be strategically wrong, strategically ignorant, and hypocritical is difficult to explain with a unitary view of the brain. However, these phenomena are easily understood after viewing the brain as a modular system, with interacting, adaptive, modules. A person's recent history, current state, and context dictate which module will be activated at any given time. For that reason, a person may take two very different stances on the same issue, depending on the context. Because the modules are running the show, it is quite likely that the person is completely unaware of contradictions that he or she may make. By shedding light on the function of modules in the brain, people can acknowledge that contradictions in people's behavior are the rule, not the exception.

Charles Darwin was intimately familiar with the Holy Bible, as he studied to become a clergyman in the Church of England (Hergenahn, 2005) and received his B.A. from Christ's College, Cambridge (Appleman, 1979). He was, no doubt, familiar with Isaiah 11:6 "And a little child shall lead them" (Metzger and Murphy, 1994). Though biblical scholars dispute which parts of Isaiah's writings are actually attributable to Isaiah (Hauer and Young, 1994), the statement is used here in the context of common cultural use. The phrase itself, can be thought of as a meme (Dawkins, 1976), finding its way into colloquial speech. Kurzban's compelling discussion of the modular nature of our

psychology should provide much new discussion and empirical investigation into the concept of the self—leading psychology from the Cartesian Theater, one module at a time.

References

- Appleman, P. (Ed.). (1979). *Darwin: A Norton critical edition* (2nd ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dennett, D.C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Dutton, D.G., and Aron, A.P. (1974). Some evidence for heightened sexual attraction under conditions of high anxiety. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30, 510-517.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, and Company.
- Hauer, C.E., and Young, W.A. (1994). *An introduction to the Bible: A journey into three worlds*. (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: John Wiley.
- Hendrick, C. (1995). Evolutionary psychology and models of explanation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 6, 47-49.
- Hendrick, C. (2005). Evolution as a foundation for psychological theories. In S. Strack (Ed.), *Handbook of personology and psychopathology* (pp. 3-23). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Hergenhahn, B.R. (2005). *An introduction to the history of psychology* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Higgins, E.T. (1996). Ideals, oughts, and regulatory focus: Affect and motivation from distinct pains and pleasures. In P.M. Gollwitzer, and J.A. Bargh (Eds.), *The psychology of action: Linking cognition and motivation to behavior* (pp. 91-113). New York: Guilford.
- Kenrick, D.T., Sadalla, E.K., and Keefe, R.C. (1998). Evolutionary cognitive psychology: The missing heart of modern cognitive science. In C. Crawford and D.L. Krebs (Eds.), *Handbook of evolutionary psychology: Ideas, issues, and applications* (pp. 485-514). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Machiavelli, N. (1527/1950). *The prince and the discourses*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mather, R.D. (2007, April). Toward a unified social psychology: The integrative social paradigm. *Journal of Scientific Psychology*, 8-13.
- Markus, H., and Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954-969.
- Metzger, B.M., and Murphy, R.E. (Eds.). (1994). *The new Oxford annotated Bible* (New Revised Standard Version). New York: Oxford.
- Pinker, S. (1997). *How the mind works*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Schachter, S., and Singer, J. (1962). Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state. *Psychological Review*, 69, 379-399.
- Tooby, J., and Cosmides, L. (1992). The psychological foundations of culture. In J.H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, and J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*. (pp. 19-136). New York: Oxford.
- Wilson, E.O. (1998). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York: Vintage.