

# How does our mind work?

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The psychiatrist Sigmund Freud is famous for promoting the idea that most mental activity is unconscious, and today most people think that Freud introduced this idea into our understanding of the mind. In fact, in 1870 the internationally eminent British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley published a brief theory of automaticity in *Body and Mind*.

Maudsley's goal was to establish the theory of mental activity on a scientific basis so that psychiatrists would think scientifically about mental activity just as scientists think scientifically about the subject matters of their fields of study. Maudsley wanted to rid the theory of mind of its pre-scientific vestiges, just as biologists and biochemists were ridding biology of the concept of vitalism.

Unfortunately, when Freud published his theories a few decades after *Body and Mind*, rather than building competently on Maudsley's theory, Freud did what Maudsley had explicitly eschewed in *Body and Mind*: Freud added needless complexity to the theory of mind.

All that we need in order to understand the unconscious activity of the mind is to take Maudsley's idea of automaticity and develop it competently. I present such a theory of the mind in my book *Why Human Life Makes Sense*, Edition 2 (2012), which, by the way, I developed before I discovered Maudsley's work.

Here is a summary of relevant facets of the model of the mind that I developed.

## **Volitional unit vs. automatic unit**

The mind has four basic components or units: volitional, automatic, sensory, and motor. The sensory unit brings sensory signals to the mind, while the motor unit carries motor signals to the body. The automatic unit processes information automatically, without direct volitional control, while the volitional unit processes information intentionally, under direct volitional control. Automatic processing is unconscious, while volitional processing is conscious.

The automatic unit manages the ongoing, life support processes of our body, such as causing our heart to beat and our lungs to breathe. The automatic unit also stores all of the information that we learn. By contrast, the volitional unit supervises the cognitive processing that we intentionally decide to do. The dual roles of the automatic unit and the volitional unit in the learning process are well summarized in the following adage:

### ***Practice makes perfect***

The volitional unit guides the practicing of some skill, such as playing a C chord on the guitar, while the automatic unit learns how to perform the respective skill. With sufficient practice, the skill becomes automated so that if we wish to perform it, say, playing a C chord, we only need to decide to play the chord, and the automatic unit will cause our fingers to efficiently play the chord without the volitional unit having to intentionally guide our fingers. This is the way that all of our skills — thinking, speaking, acting — are learned and refined. Although volitional, conscious processes are relatively slow, automatic, unconscious processes can become very fast with sufficient practice.

## **Reason vs. intuition**

We know what reasoning consists of, but what is intuition? Intuition seems mysterious, yet we know that it is an integral and essential facet of our cognitive processing. So what is it?

Intuition is nothing more than results produced by the automatic unit of our mind, and this explains the mystery. Automatic processing is unconscious, so our intuitive insight seems mysterious, almost magical, coming from nowhere — a sixth sense. But, in fact, it is the result of the extensive learning and skill-development that we have engaged in throughout our life.

To illustrate, suppose that you are in a life-threatening situation of some kind, say, a tornado. Whose intuition would you trust more: the intuition of someone having years of experience with tornados, or the intuition of someone without any such experience?

### **Conscience**

What is conscience?

Conscience is our intuition pertaining to moral issues. Thus, our conscience is the result of innate propensities and learning, so the particulars of conscience vary from person to person.

Here is our meetup on this topic:

#### ***Should you trust your conscience?***

<http://www.meetup.com/Why-human-life-makes-sense/events/136622822>

### **Faith**

What is religious faith?

Western religions base their claim of truth, not on reason, but on faith. According to such teaching, faith provides direct insight into the truth of the respective religion. What is faith? Faith is just intuition pertaining to religious matters. Hence, faith is the result of innate propensities and learning, so the ostensible insights of faith vary from person to person.

Here is our meetup on this topic:

#### ***Where does religious faith come from?***

<http://www.meetup.com/Why-human-life-makes-sense/events/138411362>

### **Emotion**

I think that the simplest way to understand emotion is that it is psychological energy that can be realized in different forms just as light can be realized in different colors. Thus, we have emotional colors such as love, joy, sorrow, anger, hatred, sexual passion, etc. But these are only extremes of realization. We live with an ongoing ambient realization of psychological energy that underlies our ongoing daily motivation to live and to be productive.

### **Men vs. women**

We can now understand the overall difference between men and women. Note that by *overall difference* I mean the frequency distribution for men vs. the frequency distribution for women. For example, when plotted, the frequency distribution for the height of men lies largely to the right of the frequency distribution for the height of women, but there is overlap because some women are taller than some men.

Based on my experience in life, I think that men tend to use explicit reasoning more than women do. Complementing this, I think that men tend to trust the results of explicit reasoning more than women do, while women tend to trust intuition more than men do.

What does emotion have to do with this difference between men and woman? Nothing. The association of emotion with this difference in cognitive preference is a fallacy that is inadvertently conveyed in use of the word *feeling*. The word *feeling* is used to refer both to intuition and to emotion, and this is where the confusion lies. If someone says, "I feel that we should take the freeway," the word *feel* does not refer to emotion but to intuition.

I think that once the concepts of emotion and intuition are accurately understood, there is no reason to believe that women are more emotional than men are.

There are differences between men and women in the *expression* of emotion, but I think that these differences are largely due to cultural norms.

For example, it is more acceptable for a man to express strong anger than for a woman to express strong anger. I think that part of the reason for this is that a man's lower voice and larger body enable him to express strong anger more effectively than a woman can.

As another example, at a memorial service for a person, it is more acceptable for a woman to cry publicly than it is for a man to cry publicly. In our culture, it is expected that a man will suppress the expression of sorrow sufficiently to prevent public crying, while it is acceptable if a woman does not.

Here is our meetup on this topic:

***Are women more emotional than men?***

<http://www.meetup.com/Why-human-life-makes-sense/events/135475642>

**Developing a relation**

When two people are trying to develop a close friendship with each other, it is similar to their trying to walk together at the same pace through a range of walking situations. The difficulty in achieving this will vary from pair to pair due to similarities and differences in their personalities and their life experiences.

As such a friendship successfully develops, what happens over time may be characterized in terms of practice makes perfect, for it is the result of the automatic unit of each person's mind learning how to keep stride with the other person so that keeping stride becomes automatic and seems natural. The closer the friendship, the greater the skill is of both people's automatic units in keeping stride. A deeply satisfying marriage exemplifies the ultimate in such achievement.

**Meeting format**

At the meeting, I'll briefly present my model of the mind, using figures from my book. Then we'll have an open discussion about the ramifications of the model in understanding the many relevant issues of human cognition and human behavior, including conscience, religious faith, and gender differences.