

PLAYBOY FORUM

THINK AGAIN

AS WE UNDERSTAND HOW WE THINK, WE HAVE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

BY STEVEN PINKER

Every era has a conception of who we are. In classical times it was the doctrine of Political Man, which defined humans in terms of their place in the social order. In the Christian Middle Ages we had Religious Man, defined by his relationship with God. The Enlightenment brought us Economic Man, who organized his life around the rational pursuit of self-interest. And then, according to the critic Philip Rieff, the 20th century brought us Psychological Man—Sigmund Freud's conception of a complex psyche balancing its instinctual origins with the demands of civilization.

Rieff was wrong in designating psychoanalysis as the official theory of the Psychological Human (as we might call it today). Few scientists believe that little boys have an unconscious desire to copulate with their mothers. But he was ahead of his time in noting that we increasingly understand ourselves in terms of the inner workings of our minds, their origin in the natural world and their interplay with culture and civilization. Advances in cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary biology and genetics are being brought into psychology and are illuminating human nature in breathtaking ways.

The result will be insights into spheres of life that may not have seemed psychological at all. Take the three spheres that defined our self-concept in earlier eras: politics, religion and economics. Political ideologies, we now know, are partly heritable—people are genetically predisposed, in part, to left-wing or right-wing world-views—and they embrace different conceptions of what counts as moral (fairness to individuals, for liberals, versus loyalty to a community, for conservatives). Religion emerges from a brain predisposed to see disembodied spirits everywhere and to ask “why” questions of

everything in sight. Economic behavior—and, we now see, misbehavior—is shaped by cognitive illusions about risk, loss and probability. Also under the microscope are beauty, sexuality, reasoning, language, social relationships, violence and the other human obsessions.

Our understanding of ourselves in terms of evolved neural software is bound to deliver huge bonuses. Our policies in education, economics and conflict resolution, in particular, can only benefit from a more realistic understanding of what makes people tick. How can we overcome children's naive conceptions of life and matter and get them to understand the very different world described

by science? How can risk be communicated to investors in a way that resonates with human intuition? Can die-hard enemies be enticed into a peace agreement with rational incentives and sweeteners, or must their moralistic passions and taboos be indulged as well?

The new conception of humans' place in nature will also deliver shocks to our sense of the ultimate pur-

pose and value of life. The idea that every human is equipped with a soul that exercises free will, finds meaning from God and is rewarded or punished in an afterlife is hard to reconcile with the idea that the human mind is a product of evolution. It is also hard to reconcile with the idea that humans are infinitely malleable, and hence ultimately perfectible, by social engineering or political reform. None of this sentences humans to live a life without meaning or morality, but it does urge us to do some hard thinking about what they are.

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