
BOOK REVIEW

A review of *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness*, by Merlin Donald, 2001. New York: Norton, xiv + 371 pp. ISBN 0-393-04950-7. \$18.95 USD

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In Donald's (1991) previous book *The Origin of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Cognition and Culture*, he criticized the idea of the homunculus, the little man inside our heads that calls the shots, arguing for the role of culture in the development of consciousness. In *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness*, he considered the relationship between consciousness and culture in greater detail, for example, arguing against Chomskians. In this review, I shall consider the relevance and articulation of Donald's contention that there is a socio-cultural basis of consciousness.

Donald's book, like most stories, begins with a problem: we have tended to consider consciousness that private place that no one else can reach. Indeed, as he pointed out, in modern Western culture, influenced by psychology, even our romantic arts sought to tell of things no one else had access to: our experiences; he challenges this picture, emphasizing the functional and social role of consciousness.

The problem with dwelling upon the private nature of consciousness, however, is that it conceals its social origins, function, and fruition. We are consciousness because it helps us plan, work in unison by understanding other minds (e.g., to fight wars, and comprehend ourselves).

To add a bit more context, it is also worth noting that traditional cognitive scientists followed suit; they sought to explain the workings of the mind, by looking into the structure of the brain alone.

Donald, then, attempted to reverse the tendency to look inside our skulls. As he put it in the preface: "[T]he human mind has a collective counterpart: culture...The key to understanding the human intellect is not so much the design of the individual brain as the synergy of many brains" (p. xiii). We must, he contended, understand the co-evolution of consciousness and culture.

After establishing the problem, a solipsistic styled approach to consciousness, Donald sought to defend that it is functional. That is, against the so-called hardliners that deny either the existence or utility of consciousness, he claimed consciousness—as we have often historically held—is our shining star. He also discussed various levels of awareness, at least opening the door, for example, to at least considering animal consciousness, which we have traditionally spurned.

The fruition of the book lies in the links he tries to establish between culture and consciousness. What is remarkable about us, according to Donald, is that so much of what we are is learned; we are the result of enculturation.

A central concern of 20th century intellectuals has been language; but even here, Donald extols the importance of consciousness to learning language against, for instance, Pinker and those that emphasize the innateness of these abilities.

The word I have so far left out of this review is “evolution.” Within the framework of evolution, Donald speaks of bio-culture; that is, our social habits have sometimes left an imprint on our biology, so much so that we can no longer exist easily, if at all, outside of society. The idea is that human beings have evolved collectively, adapting in various ways to differing environments. That fact that we are conscious (suppose!) has allowed us to be more than our brains; and more than our collective acts. Evolution has granted us the ability for variability, or brain plasticity, in the jargon of neuroscience.

In turn, our cultural habits have left their mark, inclining us to a social existence in a number of ways, like through language. Consider modern life. We go to school, a public institution to learn; we develop abilities deemed valuable to the society; and even when we write books for ourselves (in Donald’s case to feed his “monster” of curiosity), there is an unspoken audience in mind: people like me who are interested in what he has to say. We come full circle (see Figure 1).

Donald, however, points out cases, like reading, where our cultural abilities have outstripped our biological ability to adapt: we have no special module for reading; rather, as he said, reading relies on using existing abilities like vision and language. Donald ends his book (not to give away the clincher, I hope!) by contending that the triumph of consciousness is to reflect back on itself, which was, incidentally, what the speculative philosophers of old aimed at: the unity of the mind and world in God; but that goes beyond Donald’s own efforts as a psychologist.

Though Donald has done a valuable service to those interested in the consciousness literature by criticizing the individualistically oriented approach that has dominated cognitive science and our thinking about the mind, he often falls prey to the old ways of talking. He said for example: “We are the species that invented culture” (p. xiv), though that suggests a causal relationship that is unidirectional (i.e., A causes B, not vice versa); “we seek culture” (p. 300), but that suggests Rousseau’s fiction of a time before culture; and again, “our cultures invade us and set our agendas”, which again suggests we are something before culture, all of which contradicts his core message: we exist in part by, through, and for culture. The relationship between consciousness and culture is bi-directional. Even our most extreme acts of Thoreau-like defiance are attempts, in light of Donald’s argument, to pay heed to cultural values of fairness that have perhaps been

engrained in our brains because we needed to get along to survive on the Savannahs of Africa (if we are to believe, e.g., the emerging literature on naturalized ethics).

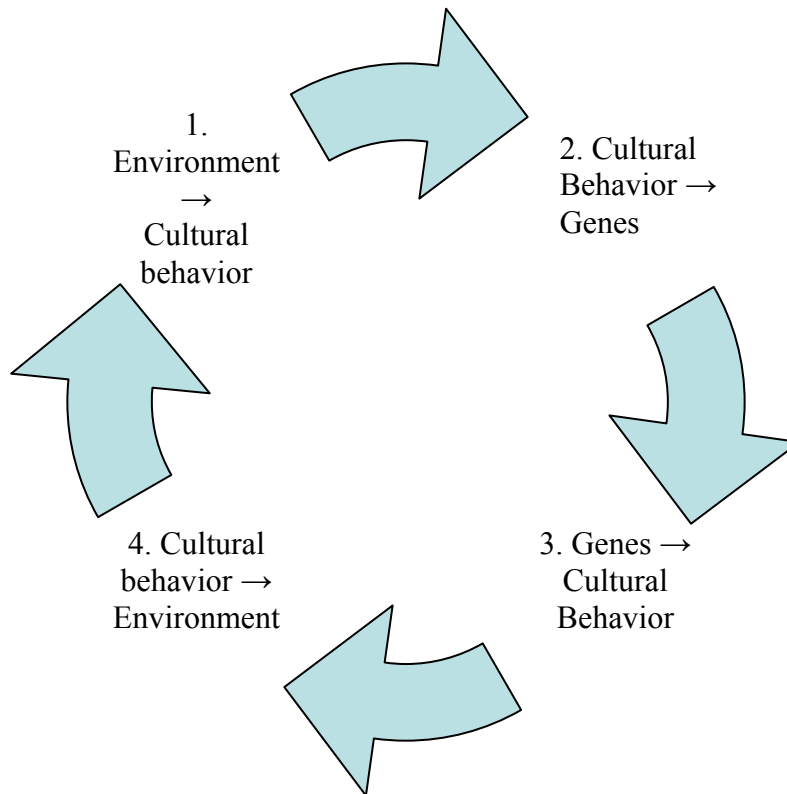


Figure 1: The evolutionary relationship between culture and, for instance, brain ontogeny. In outline, we act collectively in face of a common environment, in turn, affecting our genes that reinforce certain patterns of behavior, all of which changes our environment. And, the wheel keeps spinning on.

Finally, as another case of harkening backward, he also claimed that we are the only species whose potential cannot be “realized on its own” (p. 324); this anthropocentrism is questionable: we know that many species do not develop without proper socialization in their groups. For someone concerned about the evolution of brain functioning, he should have been more sensitive to the positive links between species.

Donald, however, can be pardoned for occasional misleading expressions: it is not easy to speak in a new way, one free of the trappings of the individualism that, if we are to believe him, misrepresented the origins, function, and purpose of consciousness; after all, that was part of a culture, too. There is still, however, something private about consciousness. Just as we sometimes politically exist in a state of tension between ourselves and our fellows, so too must we comprehend ourselves as both alone in our joys and pains; and together in our ability to grasp those of ourselves and others.

The key to avoiding the extremes, and hence a way out of a traditional one-sided approach to the mind, of a psychologically solipsistic approach to consciousness—how does the brain work?—or cultural relativism—we are all just socially constructed—I think, lies in the concept of evolution that Donald emphasized. We are part of a dynamic process, where environment, culture, and biology interact. Being able to understand the anatomical parts of the process that allow for consciousness (e.g., brain functioning) and the totality of its form on an evolutionary scale is where an important philosophical challenge lies, one that Donald addressed remarkably well by emphasizing the role of culture.

If I have failed to be too critical in this review, it is because I think that Donald is in outline right. The upshot of Donald's thesis is this: We need to consider, and synthesize when desirable, both sides of these debates on cognition: there are individual and social aspects to consciousness, as well as automatic and meta-cognitive dimensions of our behavior. An integrative perspective that synthesizes these dichotomies holds important implications for cognitive scientists taking a theoretical interest in sociology; philosophers considering the self both as situated and as the fruition of an evolutionary process; and those interested in artificial intelligent systems exploring the intelligence that emerges when robots work together to achieve aims in a changing environment.

Donald's achievement, then, lies in contributing to reversing the tide to a middle point between extremes, so that we can gain a more sophisticated understanding of our predicament (as a Heideggerian may put it) as conscious individuals-in-a-given social context. In our distance from each other, alone, we are in a common proximity, together.

References

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