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How the Mind Works by Steven Pinker
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(and paperback?)

Why do we think the way we do? Why do men fight over women? Why do we enjoy music? .. or if those questions aren't tricky enough, how about "Do beetles enjoy sex?" or "How do I know that *you're* not a zombie?".

In his comprehensive overview of evolutionary psychology, *How the Mind Works,* MIT professor Steven Pinker tackles these and many more questions. And yes, he does realise that his title calls for a little humility - at the start he admits we don't understand how the mind works and at the end concludes there are some questions - like sentience and free will - that are forever beyond us. Nevertheless, he argues, most questions can be answered roughly as follows:

"The mind is a system of organs of computation, designed by natural selection to solve the kinds of problems our ancestors faced in their foraging way of life." (p 21)

Evolutionary psychology (and its predecessor human socio-biology) can provoke harsh criticism but happily Pinker does not waste much space dealing with the objectors. Instead he painstakingly explains the theory. The task is to reverse-engineer the human mind, asking what it was designed for - not to discover truth or beauty, or to harmonise with nature - but for one reason only; to maximise the number of copies of the genes that created it.

This is essentially the "selfish gene" view and the first problem is that "almost everyone misunderstands the theory" (p 43). People think it implies that all human behaviour must be directed towards spreading genes. This is obviously not true, even without the classic examples of celibacy and adoption. But this is not what the theory means. Rather, it means that the way we think and behave is such that, if our ancestors had thought and behaved like that, they would have been more likely to pass on the genes that made them that way. So, for example, good spatial skills would aid foraging, we have sexual desires and marriage practices that would have promoted procreation, and we have the "Machiavellian intelligence" that enables us to lie, cheat, steal, form alliances, and have life-long friendships.

Helpful as this approach is, I was not convinced that all of art and culture is designed to press the pleasure buttons set up by the genes. Another possibility is that ideas, skills, stories, songs (indeed everything we pass on by imitation) are also replicators, or "memes" as Richard Dawkins calls them. But Pinker rejects this idea in a few paragraphs. Thus his theory is very persuasive on the evolution of our brains but less so on the evolution of culture.

Pinker's book is too long. It is neither a textbook that you can select facts from, nor short enough to enjoy reading right through. Nevertheless it is a masterful overview of the most exciting field of contemporary psychology. Evolutionary theory has at last reached the human mind and you had better read Pinker before all your students do.

498 words

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