Consciousness evolved for the greater good, not just the self

The unconscious mind tricks you into believing in a sense of self, argue two psychologists. And it does this for an unexpected reason.

“What does this mean for free will and personal responsibility?” (Image: Trent Parke/Magnum Photos)
There is no denying the reality of consciousness. For most of us, it is so self-evident that it requires no explanation. Your conscious self is the owner of your private reality, and your actions stem from conscious choice.

However, the more that is discovered about consciousness, the less obvious its role appears to be. For example, measurements of brain activity reveal that muscles and brain areas prepare for an action, such as a reaching out for an object, before we are even aware of our intention to make that movement. As noted by the psychologist Jeffrey Grey and others, consciousness simply occurs too late to affect the outcomes of the mental processes apparently linked to it.

So where does this powerful sense of self come from? We suggest it is the product of our unconscious mind, and provides an evolutionary advantage that developed for the benefit of the social group, not the individual.

A close examination of your own conscious experience reveals how little control, if any, you have over it or its contents. When you regain consciousness each morning, after losing it the night before, it arrives without effort. Likewise, your thoughts and memories arrive ready formed and you can't really exercise control over that experience: a blue shirt remains a blue shirt even if you wish it to be different.

We proposed 15 years ago that consciousness is an elaborate creation and that everything experienced in consciousness has already been formed backstage by unconscious processes (New Scientist, 18 November 2000). Relevant information is broadcast from the unconscious to form the contents of conscious experience. This means that self-awareness, thoughts, feelings and intentions are simply broadcasts of unconscious brain outputs. This occurs in much the same way that having the experience of seeing the colour blue or feeling the emotion of sadness is the product of a series of uncredited unconscious brain processes.

We hold that our very real experience of the contents of consciousness is a characteristic of this internal broadcasting and hence conscious awareness has no specific or generic cognitive function.

**Unconscious control**

So if the actions that we attribute to our consciousness are in fact under the control of unconscious processes, why do we believe we have a "self" with executive control over our cognitive functions? We consider this perception of a self to be the result of at least two powerful, automatic psychological predispositions.

The first relates to perceptions of causality. There is a strong link between the conscious experience of intending to move a limb and experiencing the movement. But being aware that you intend to move your limb is not the same as saying that your awareness made your limb move – especially when the intention to move precedes awareness of that intention. However, our unconscious thought systems generate the belief that it was the self’s awareness of the intention that brought
about the movement. It does this to maintain a consistent conscious narrative featuring a self that is in control. This perceived causal relationship also applies to thinking and thoughts, feelings and moods.

The second psychological predisposition is anthropomorphism, a tendency to attribute human characteristics and intentionality to animals and inanimate objects. We believe that humans anthropomorphise their own consciousness, attributing agency and meaning to vividly experienced phenomena.

So why did this powerful sense of conscious awareness that we feel on waking evolve? What purpose does it serve?

Although our conscious experience feels personal and intimately real to us, we suggest that it is a product of evolution that provides a survival advantage for the wider social group, rather than directly for the individual. We think that consciousness emerged alongside other developments in brain processing that conferred a powerful social evolutionary benefit of communicating our internal thoughts to others.

In order for this to happen, it was necessary to generate a personalised construction of self and attribute to it the essential cognitive abilities of awareness and agency, as well as the creation of inner perceptions of the world. It is our capacity to tell others of the contents of our consciousness that confers the evolutionary advantage – not the experience of consciousness itself.

Why should this ability be advantageous? It lets you share with other people, via unconsciously driven systems, selected contents from your consciousness including beliefs, prejudices, feelings and decisions. This in turn enables the development of adaptive strategies such as predicting the behaviour of others, which could be beneficial to species survival.

This sharing of unconsciously generated, consciously experienced self-narratives also allows for the possibility that the mental content of individuals can be changed by outside influences such as education and other forms of socialising. This is important for disseminating ideas regarding norms and values. In fact, we argue that none of the social systems that human societies depend on would be possible without our compelling sense of self awareness.

If consciousness and the sense of self are elaborate contrivances by unconscious systems designed to benefit the group, what are the implications for free will and personal responsibility? Importantly, we are not dispensing with these concepts, which are central to most democratic systems, we are just saying they are embedded in unconscious brain systems.

This new understanding of consciousness as serving the needs of the social group rather than the individual allows us to move from seeing ourselves not as individuals but as “dividuals” whose interests and personhood are shared with others. As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche noted, “consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings…consciousness does not really belong to
man’s individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature.” Consciousness therefore provides a powerful evolutionary advantage by allowing shared communication, and extending each individual’s understanding of the world.

Profile

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This article appeared in print under the headline "Consciousness isn’t all about you, you know"

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