

WEEK 5 AGENCY

STEP 5.4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMAN MIND

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Agency admits of degrees. **Not all minds have an equal amount of agency.** And speaking comparatively in biological terms, not all creatures have an equal amount of agency and this is because they don't all have an equal amount of prefrontal lobes, which is the anatomical scene of action of agency, resting as it does upon inhibition and the virtual action of thinking.

When I introduced you to consciousness as one of the fundamental properties of the mind, I mentioned that it's something that we share with all other vertebrates and that it developed 525 million years ago. When I introduced you to the concept of intentionality, one of the instinctual emotional systems that we share with other mammals, all other mammals, I mentioned that these systems evolved about 200 million years ago.

Our prefrontal lobes, our evolutionary pride and joys, our crowning glory of the human brain, which differentiates us from our closest relatives, the other primates-- the difference between our prefrontal lobes and those of other primates evolved as recently as 200,000 years ago, 200,000 years ago as opposed to 200 million or 525 million years ago, with regard to those other aspects of the mind.

But the capacity that the prefrontal lobes endowed upon us to think ahead to imagine scenarios that haven't really happened, that aren't actually happening here and now, enabled us to make a breakthrough 12,000 years ago which was of fundamental importance for humanity.

12,000 years ago, our ancestors realised, thinking ahead, that it wasn't necessary to carry on hunting animals and foraging for edible plants. They had the idea of planting the plants, of agriculture, and breeding animals, of animal husbandry. With the keeping of animals and the development of agriculture came the development of permanent human settlements. It wasn't necessary to forage and hunt and gather all over the valley. So people stayed in the same place for long periods of time and large groups of people accumulated in those places, much larger than the small hunter-gatherer groups that our instinctual emotional mechanisms prepared us for.

So in towns, we had to develop new regulatory systems. We had to think them up and our prefrontal lobes enabled us to do that. So thank heavens for prefrontal lobes. The abstract systems of language enabled us to write systems of laws and rules that govern

civilised human behaviour. This culminates in things like the Bill of Rights and the United Nations.

But do we really live like that? Do we really obey those laws? Actually, there's a uniquely human tendency to hypocrisy. We say how we want to live. We sketch these ideals for ourselves, but we don't really live that way. For example, the preamble to the United Nations' Bill of Rights was written by a countryman of mine, Jan Christian Smuts, who was a white supremacist.

Think of it. Why is this human tendency there? That's why I've mentioned all of these spans of evolutionary time. It's because prefrontal lobe development nearly 200,000 years ago became uniquely human. And only 12,000 years ago, we began to live in permanent settlements. All of this is a little cork bobbing on the ocean of the 525 million or 200 million years of evolutionary time that design these deeper systems which have so much more power to govern the way that the mind works.

We do have free will, but not as much as we like to believe we do. That free will rests, as I've explained, upon our capacity to think, which rests upon our capacity to inhibit instinctual emotional tendencies. This gives us great flexibility and it's an enormous adaptive advance. But it comes at a price. By inhibiting those instinctual emotional systems, we don't know why we do what we do. This opacity, this **lack of awareness of our own motivational impetus**, is another **uniquely human property**. This is why we ask, what's it all for? What does this all mean? Other animals know perfectly well what it's all for and what it all means.



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Think about it. In Blombos Cave here in South Africa, 70,000 years ago, the first known cultural artefact was produced, a piece of ochre that somebody had cross-hatched in some sort of symbolic fashion that didn't serve any useful purpose. It seemed to mean something, these lines that I was going to say "she" etched on the stone. I always imagine for some reason it's a woman who made it.

I suspect that if I was to be able to speak to that woman and ask her, why did you do that? What motivated you to make these uniquely human symbolic markings on that piece of ochre? She'd say, I don't know. That's a uniquely human thing to do. In fact, there's another uniquely human thing that she might do. She might make up a story about it, **confabulate**, and say, well, those lines will make it rain or somehow control the gods, or some nonsense like that. That's another uniquely human attribute born of language, our tendency to confabulate, make up stories.



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