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The social animal

By Julian Baggini

Whether in education, ethics or politics, we ignore our social natures at our peril



'Crowd #2 (Emma)', 2012. The exhibition 'Alex Prager: Face in the Crowd' runs until March 9 2014 at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC

Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect, by Matthew Lieberman, *OUP*, *RRP£18.99/Crown*, *RRP\$26*, 384 pages

Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and Them, by Joshua Greene, *Atlantic Books*, *RRP£22/Penguin Press*, *RRP\$29.95*, 432 pages

Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice, by Martha Nussbaum, *Belknap Press*, *RRP£25/\$35*, 480 pages

Human beings are born social. Evolution has forced women to give birth before their babies could possibly survive by themselves, since our big brains mean any more time in the womb and our heads couldn't get out.

As life goes on, our social connections continue to be vital. We live in families, tribes and nations, and increasingly as part of an interconnected global community. The problem is that these groups make different and often competing demands on us. We may well be social animals but our habitats are changing, and we haven't yet adapted to them.

That is the central problem dealt with in three very different books about being with others. Matthew Lieberman approaches the issue from the perspective of his pioneering field of social cognitive neuroscience, the study of how the brain responds to the social world; Joshua Greene looks at it through the lens of moral philosophy and psychology; and Martha Nussbaum brings political philosophy to the party, infusing her discussion with her trademark blend of aesthetic and historical analysis.

Lieberman's task is in some ways the most straightforward. His aim in *Social* is to impress upon us just how much we have learnt in

recent years about the wiring of our brains. Social thinking is so fundamental that it fills our consciousness whenever we switch off from any pressing task. This “default mode network” activity “precedes any conscious interest in the social world”, having been detected in babies as young as two days.

Most neuroscientists believe we have a dedicated system for social reasoning, quite different to the one that is used for non-social thinking. What’s more, when one system is on, the other turns off. Lieberman explains how the social system fulfils three core tasks. First, it must make connections with others, which involves feeling social pains and pleasures, such as those of rejection or belonging. Second, it must develop mind-reading skills, in order to know what others are thinking, so as to predict their behaviour and act appropriately. Finally, it must use these abilities to harmonise with others, so as to thrive safely in the social world.

Peering into the skull leads to some intriguing observations. For example, Lieberman says that brains “experience threats to our social connections in much the same way they experience physical pain”, and that some brain scans of social and physical pain are indistinguishable. Most surprisingly, taking paracetamol appears to lessen both. The visceral nature of emotional hurt might well explain why one survey found that more people feared public speaking than death, or why languages around the world use metaphors such as a broken heart, a punch in the gut or a slap in the face.

This isn’t just fascinating for its own sake. Lieberman has a social and political purpose. The contemporary western world just doesn’t take enough account of our fundamentally social nature. “We are square (social) pegs being forced into round (nonsocial) holes,” he says. Part of the blame for this lands on the enlightenment idea of the autonomous rational agent. This individualism is so ingrained in the west that what eastern cultures and Lieberman call “harmonising” is more often thought of as “conforming”, with all the negative connotations that entails.

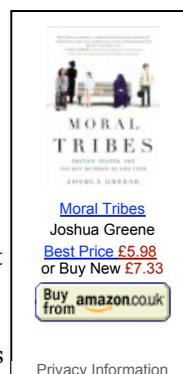
“Some day we will look back and wonder how we ever had lives, work and schools that weren’t guided by the principles of the social brain,” he says. In the book’s last chapters he makes some suggestions for how we might reach this truly enlightened age, some more credible than others. In education, he says we must find a way to “stop making the social brain the enemy during class time”. That makes sense but I’m not sure I like the sound of “communication classes” replacing English. Some employers might welcome the study that found reminding people of how their work helped others improved performance more than cash incentives – but only if there is such a fact to be reminded of. As for his idea that apartment blocks should have social organisers and more communal space, I’m sure I’m not the only one who shudders at the prospect of living in a grown-up version of a student hall of residence.

While Lieberman presents a sunny picture of the potential of unlocking the social brain, in *Moral Tribes* Joshua Greene exposes a serious problem with its wiring. Our moral brains were designed to solve the problem of “Me versus Us”. It does this by creating emotions such as guilt, shame and loyalty, all of which are necessary to keep our narrow selfishness in check, so that we can reap the benefits of co-operation.

Evolution has thus made us tribal. On our crowded planet today, however, our biggest problem is that of “Us versus Them”, and tribalism just makes it worse. “Our moral brains evolved for co-operation *within groups*”, he says, but they “did not evolve for co-operation *between groups*”. This is what Greene calls “The Tragedy of Commonsense Morality”: what our intuition tells us is morally right is often very wrong, if we want to live peacefully with those who hold different values.

The good news is that “being wired for tribalism does not mean being *hardwired* for tribalism”, a vital distinction that is often missed when people write about how the brain determines all that we do. “Morality can do things it did not evolve (biologically) to do,” says Greene. How can it do this? By switching from the intuitive “automatic mode” that underpins our gut reactions to the calculating, rational “manual mode”. This, for Greene, means embracing utilitarianism, “the native philosophy of the manual mode”. Utilitarianism takes the idea that “happiness is what matters, and everyone’s happiness counts the same”, generating the simple three-word maxim, “maximise happiness impartially”.

Greene is not the first to think that he has found “a universal moral philosophy that members of all human tribes can share” and that those who disagree are simply not being rational enough. Many a philosopher will raise an eyebrow at his claim that “the only truly compelling objection to utilitarianism is that it gets the intuitively wrong answers in certain cases”.



At least one strong objection is suggested by what Greene himself says. He knows full well that the kind of absolutely impartial perspective demanded by utilitarianism – in which the interests of your own child, partner or friends count for no more than any others – “is simply incompatible with the life for which our brains were designed”. Greene takes this as a flaw of human beings, not his preferred moral theory. But when someone, for example, dedicates a book to his wife, as Greene does, this does not reflect a failure to be appropriately objective. A world in which people showed no such preferences would be an inhuman, not an ideal, one. A morality that values human flourishing, as Greene thinks it should, should put our particular attachments at its core, not view them as “species-typical moral limitations” to be overcome.

If Greene overreaches, he achieves a great deal in the attempt. This is an important synthesising work of great depth and breadth. Time and again he nails what is centrally important, such as in his observation that “The problem is that we’ve been looking for universal moral principles that *feel right*, and there may be no such thing.” He also makes it clear how people can pursue their own interests while being genuinely motivated by justice. “Groups can have *selfish* reasons for favouring some moral values over others,” he says, naming this phenomenon “biased fairness”.

Having long argued for the importance of emotion in ethics, Martha Nussbaum must be pleased to see these distinguished peers rallying to the cause. In *Political Emotions*, she argues more specifically for the importance of love in politics. She is well aware that many liberal-minded intellectuals are wary about bringing too much emotion into the public square but she argues persuasively that “ceding the terrain of emotion-shaping to antiliberal forces gives them a huge advantage in the people’s hearts and risks making people think of liberal values as tepid and boring”. The political cultivation of emotions is needed “to engender and sustain strong commitment to worthy projects that require effort and sacrifice”.

Nussbaum makes the general point eloquently and persuasively but her lengthy, at times repetitive, elaboration of it is not usually as compelling. She advocates an inclusive patriotism, for example, arguing that the nation is “a necessary intermediary between the ego and the whole of humanity”. As evidence of the possibility of such a benign belonging she examines in detail not only the speeches but also sometimes the dress and demeanour of Washington, Lincoln, King, Gandhi and Nehru, all of whom “understood the need to touch citizens’ hearts and to inspire, deliberately, strong emotions”. But these were exceptional people talking at exceptional times in their countries’ histories, and such cherry-picking is also evident elsewhere. She acknowledges, for instance, that “patriotic emotion continually needs critical examination” but doesn’t take seriously enough the problem that flag-waving tends to make this more difficult, with dissenters dismissed as unpatriotic.

Some other sections are not so much overlong as largely redundant. She doesn’t need contentious psychoanalytic ideas about the role of narcissism in child development to make her point about its pernicious influence in adult life, and nor does there seem to be any real insight into human affairs from a discussion of compassion among animals. As is often the case with Nussbaum, the reader is left with the sense of a good, insightful thin book trapped in the body of a fat and verbose, albeit impressively erudite, one.

Taken together, these books show how the personal is political in ways that have not been fully appreciated. None comes up with entirely convincing solutions to problems of social co-operation, within and between nations, but all help us to understand more clearly how we must take account of our affective as well as rational natures if we are to deal with them. Emotion is not the spanner in the works of a more rational society. It is the engine that powers it, which reason must understand in order to steer it wisely.

Julian Baggini is author of ‘The Ego Trick’. His latest book, ‘The Virtues of the Table’, is published this month by Granta



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