



Philosophy Is Here to Stay

Benjamin Storey

Hairdressing is among the occupations most closely correlated with happiness. Women's sexual tastes vary widely with culture and education, while men want the same things regardless of religion, education level, or the influence of culture. Introspection makes you depressed. In one study, babies as young as eight months seem to care about justice.

Such striking findings from cognitive and social science show up on almost every page of David Brooks's new book *The Social Animal*, and make it a consistently illuminating read. The book's novelistic form is pleasing, too: the informative gems from science are melded into the stories of two characters, Harold and Erica, who, while not great literary creations, are real enough to care about. In the moral and political counsel it offers, the book seems sensible as well: Success in marriage matters far more to our happiness than income level or professional status. Government cannot deal with poverty effectively without attempting to change the culture of poor communities. Terrorism should

not be understood as a response to poverty, but as a nihilistic expression of a longing for purity common among young men "caught in the no-man's-land between the ancient and modern."

But all the arresting data, all the comic-sociological observations, all the insightful meditations on the moral struggles of everyday life are not the main point of *The Social Animal*. That main point is the momentous claim Brooks made most

clearly in a *New Yorker* article adapted from the book: "Brain science helps fill the hole left by

the atrophy of theology and philosophy." On the authority of brain science, Brooks settles old philosophic quarrels, declaring that "the French Enlightenment, which emphasized reason, loses; the British Enlightenment, which emphasized sentiments, wins." He compares the cognitive revolution to the most momentous occasions in the history of Western thought: "just as Galileo 'removed the earth from its privileged position at the center of the universe,' so this intellectual revolution [in brain science] removes the

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conscious mind from its privileged place at the center of human behavior.” In politics, Brooks wants to see that “the new knowledge about our true makeup is integrated more fully into the world of public policy.” If cognitive science can fill the hole left by the atrophy of philosophy and theology; if it can vindicate some philosophies and discredit others; if it can relocate the center of human self-understanding; and if our public policy makers should look to it for guidance, then the unmistakable implication is that we should defer to it as our highest intellectual, moral, and political authority. A new sheriff, it seems, is in town.

The Social Animal, then, is an argument for a new kind of scientism. Interestingly, Brooks himself criticizes scientism in the book. Expanding on Irving Kristol’s remark that scientism is the “elephantiasis of reason,” Brooks explains that scientism entails “taking the principles of rational inquiry, stretching them without limit, and excluding any factor that doesn’t fit the formulas.” Brooks attacks the scientism of the French Revolutionaries, who “brutalized... society in the name of beginning the world anew on rational grounds,” of Frederick Taylor-inspired corporate managers who tried to turn human workers into “hyper-efficient cogs,” and of rationalist urban planners who destroyed old neighborhoods and the valuable social networks they contained so as to put efficient but

anonymous housing projects in their place. At present, Brooks sees this scientism embodied in a public policy consensus that accepts “the shallow social-science model of human behavior,” interpreting us as rational, self-interested actors who respond predictably to material incentives. Against this form of scientism, Brooks uses the findings of the cognitive revolution to emphasize the dominance of the unconscious mind, which, he writes, is “most of the mind,” and which frequently causes us to behave in ways that make no sense from a rational, self-interested perspective. He wants us to see just how much of ourselves is anything but rational.

Brooks is no doubt correct to believe that the model of man as a rational self-interested actor who behaves in ways that can be explained in mathematical terms is a gross oversimplification of our nature. But by attempting to elevate the cognitive sciences to the status of a new Galileo, Brooks merely replaces one form of scientism with another: the economists, with their demand curves, are out; the neuroscientists, with their brain scans, are in. Treating emotional and social animals as rational self-interested actors is one way to stretch the principles of rational inquiry beyond their limits; treating us as social and emotional animals who are nonetheless fully intelligible to the scientific method is another. To truly avoid scientism,

Brooks would need to articulate the limits of science in general and cognitive science in particular. But one will find no consideration of the limits of science in *The Social Animal*. While Brooks draws on philosophers, poets, and theologians in his book, he never allows them or anyone else to say to science: “hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.” In spite of Brooks’s celebration of “epistemological modesty,” there is nothing epistemologically modest about this book.

But can science—cognitive or otherwise—really bear the weight of so much authority? Can it really tell us what we need to know in order to live well? Does science really answer the questions asked by philosophy and theology? Can any science that defines itself in terms of the rigor of its methods really *see* the human phenomena in all their complexity, as philosophers, theologians, and poets aim to do? Can there really be a science of love, happiness, and nobility—the distinctly human concerns to which *The Social Animal* purports to speak? Can science really address the question of our origin, our end, and our place in the whole without which any knowledge of ourselves would be radically incomplete?

To answer these questions, we need to look at the scientific findings Brooks reports in *The Social Animal* from a perspective that does not take the authority of science for granted

and is open to aspects of human experience that might be invisible to a methodical science bent on identifying the efficient causes of things.

Let us begin with love. When Harold and Erica first fall in love, Brooks invites us to look “inside Harold’s brain” to see love as it appears to the eye of the cognitive scientist. One method scientists use to understand love is to put a patient in a brain scanner, show the patient a photo of his or her beloved, and watch which areas of the brain “light up” in response to this stimulus. Such a method might tell us something, but its understanding of love will plainly be partial: any halfway-competent Don Juan knows that love loves a beach, a bottle of wine, and a sunset. One’s ardor might be dampened by the syringes, medical scrubs, and electrodes of the laboratory, distorting the very phenomenon the scientist seeks to study. Experimental science that seeks quantifiable results can perhaps grasp those aspects of an experience such as love that will submit to the apparatus of experimentation and permit of quantification, but the rest of that experience, and in particular the *whole* of that experience, will remain the domain of philosophers and poets.

Next, consider happiness. Brooks cites extensively from social-scientific happiness research, which is conducted “mostly by asking people if they are happy and then correlating their answers with other features of

their lives.” Brooks acknowledges that this method “seems flimsy,” but argues that its results are “surprisingly stable and reliable.” The stability of the results, however, does not address the fundamental flimsiness of the method in question: the problem is not that one cannot establish a stable pattern of correlation between self-reported happiness and other aspects of life. The problem is the difficulty of measuring the correlation between self-reported happiness and actual happiness: the willingness to call oneself happy when asked by a researcher could be as much a sign of self-deception, vanity, or vapidness as it is of actual happiness. And to speak accurately of one’s own happiness, one would have to know what happiness *is*. As Brooks admits, this is “a subject of fierce debate among the experts,” which is no surprise, because any answer to the question of happiness depends on comprehensive reflection on the whole of human experience and aspiration, such as one finds in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Such reflection may be the work of a lifetime.

With respect to nobility, Brooks speaks to the distinctly human concern with the noble in a fascinating passage on *thumos*, the ancient Greek word for “spiritedness,” which he uses in the broader meaning of “ambition”—as he puts it, “the desire to have people recognize your existence, not only now but for all time.” Brooks is clearly cognizant of

the power of *thumos* for explaining human behavior, but has little to say about the explosive question upon which the notion of *thumos* opens, as Socrates pointed out long ago: What should we recognize? What deserves to be celebrated as human virtue so excellent that it should never be forgotten? What, in short, truly deserves to be called noble? Is it the warrior’s courage and martial prowess? The statesman’s capacity for superintending the political whole and leading it to greatness? Or is it the philosopher’s unstinting dedication to understanding the truth about justice, human nature, and happiness, and his willingness to live in the light of that truth? On the questions of what human activities are most worthy of respect, of which human exemplars should command our admiration and emulation, cognitive research is necessarily silent. While it might find some way to analyze *respect*—perhaps scanning our brains while we look at photos of Lincoln—when it comes to deciding what is *respectable*, the question is unintelligible from the point of view of the necessary relations of cause and effect which science studies.

Finally, we must consider a curious lacuna in *The Social Animal*: the question of our place in the whole. Brooks occasionally refers to evolutionary explanations for our preferences and predilections. For example, he notes that “evolutionary

psychologists argue that people everywhere prefer paintings that correspond to the African savanna, where humanity emerged.” He has little to say, however, about the mechanism thought to be at the root of evolution itself: a brutal struggle for genetic survival—“Nature, red in tooth and claw,” in Tennyson’s words. If that is the fundamental truth of our being, then happiness, so central to Brooks’s argument, is a delusion: nature makes us what we are and it wants the species to evolve, without the slightest concern for the happiness of individuals.

Evolution’s account of the nature of nature, though pitiless, at least speaks to the philosophic question of the character of the whole within which we find ourselves. Beyond this natural question, however, looms the theological question of the origins of the natural whole—the question of who, or what, is God. God makes an occasional appearance in *The Social Animal*, as when Harold reflects on his soul on the day of his death:

The brain was physical meat, but out of the billions of energy pulses emerged spirit and soul. There must be some supreme creative energy, he thought, that can take love and turn it into synapses and then take a population of synapses and turn it into love. The hand of God must be there.

This passage nicely encapsulates how science’s account of the brain

as “physical meat” can be compatible with an affirmation of spirit or soul. But even should we accept Brooks’s argument for the compatibility of soul and synapse, and Harold’s musing that “the hand of God” must be responsible for the enlivening of matter with spirit, we arrive only at the beginning of the theological questions: Why would God do such a thing? What kind of a God is God, anyway? Is God the God of love and mercy we know from the Gospels? Is God the radically mysterious and terrifying God who speaks to Job from the whirlwind? Or is God the God of the philosophers—not a person, and above concern with human affairs? Answers to such questions are, of course, intractably elusive. However, we cannot understand ourselves without at least attempting to face them, because the answers to them are dispositive for how we understand our place in the world, our happiness, and our end.

These are the questions about which we have become grossly inarticulate because of the undeniable atrophy of philosophy and theology from which Brooks begins. But our science recused itself from even asking such questions at its inception in the seventeenth century, when it narrowed its purview to the world of efficient causality, and thereby attained the precision and predictive power from which it derives its technical prowess and public authority. Insofar as the truly fundamental questions

are questions about wholes—from the question of a happy human life as a whole to the question of the nature and origin of the world as a whole—science, which, in the words of Francis Bacon, requires a method “which shall analyse experience and take it to pieces,” cannot tackle such questions without ceasing to be what it is. (Recent scientific talk of “emergent systems”—where, as Brooks puts it, “different elements come together and produce something that is greater than the sum of their parts”—implicitly acknowledges that the world contains phenomena that do not permit of the precise causal explanation that makes science science.) For all of the empirical precision it derives from its methods, unless science is supplemented and corrected with the holistic reflections characteristic of theology and philosophy, it is and will remain humanistically and cosmologically naïve.

None of this means that the striking findings Brooks reports from cognitive and social science are irrelevant to the question of how we should live, and Brooks should be praised for making so many new insights available to non-scientists. But his presentation of cognitive science as the decisive voice on these questions encourages our already deep-seated habit of passive deference to scientific authority, and implicitly encourages the further atrophy of philosophy and theology Brooks

laments by suggesting that science can replace them.

One sometimes wonders whether Brooks is aware that he cedes too much ground to scientism. A striking passage in the middle of *The Social Animal* suggests that he might be. Erica has started a consulting firm, hoping to use what she learned about the importance of culture from her childhood and in college to help businesses match their marketing to the cultural predilections of their customers. She finds, however, that her insights on culture get no traction with business executives, who are not attentive to the language of culture. She therefore reluctantly decides to present her work in the language of behavioral economics, which sounds, at least, like “rigorous, tough-minded science.” “Her clients,” Brooks writes, “respected science”—particularly behavioral economics, which is “hot and in demand”—and Erica yields to the predilections of her audience. One cannot help but wonder if a similar calculation took place in the mind of David Brooks. Neuroscience is hot and in demand; Edmund Burke and Alexander Hamilton, the deepest sources of Brooks’s political philosophy, are not.

In truth, the vision of human life presented in *The Social Animal* is a vision drawn from an enormous variety of sources, humanistic as well as scientific. Henry Adams-esque musings on the spirit of the Middle Ages and Allan Bloom-ite ruminations on

love and friendship are so commingled with the findings of cognitive science that the book's humanistic sources often seem at least as important as its scientific ones. Perhaps Brooks exaggerates the novelty and authority of the findings of the "cognitive revolution" to help some old insights find a wider audience in our pop-science-addled age.

Authorial responsibility, however, requires minding the difference between taking stock of the prejudice of one's audience as a rhetorical starting point and reinforcing those prejudices. Brooks rarely if ever questions the findings of cognitive or social scientists in *The Social Animal*. It was not always thus; as recently as in *On Paradise Drive* (2004), Brooks was willing to counter a Gallup poll that reported that "96 percent of teenagers said they got along with their parents" with a demur based on his own experience: "I'm not sure families are quite that healthy." He reported that "college students talk about prudential sex—the kind you have for leisure without any of that romantic Sturm und Drang, as a normal part of life," but again demurred in his own voice that "many of them are lying." One wishes that that David Brooks had been at the switch when the happiness researchers told him that hairdressers were among the happiest people in the world. If he had been, we might have gained from science without being asked to leave our judgment behind.

If, however, we set aside Brooks's puffed-up claims on behalf of the cognitive revolution, we can begin to see the true merits of his book. *The Social Animal* is an astonishing feat of research, and rescues countless important discoveries about our nature from the purgatory of specialist literature. Brooks puts this research in the service of a sensible and humane teaching about moral and political life, alternately highly serious and gently comic. His novelistic imagining of the inner lives of Harold and Erica takes us inside the struggle to be moral when our will and reason are of limited power; to find work that "absorbs all [our] abilities" and satisfies our desire for recognition without being subsumed by it; to make the sacrifices necessary to truly care for another human being and unite with that person in love; and to face death with the consolation that our conduct and character have been a serious response to the demands life makes of us.

While the story of Harold and Erica has been criticized as lacking in the high drama that is the stuff of great novels, *The Social Animal* doesn't pretend to be a great novel. Instead, Brooks imagines his characters facing the kind of moral dilemmas his readers are likely to experience: the tension between work and family, the temptations of booze and boredom-induced adultery, the struggle to focus one's attention and really think while surrounded

by “the normal data smog of cyber-connected life.” Brooks has a powerful grasp of how his professional-class readers live and think, and I saw much of myself in the mirror of the book.

Insofar as there is a little bit of Harold and Erica in each of us, *The Social Animal* can thus help us to know ourselves—an effort in which we can use all the help we can get.

But help is one thing, and authority another. On the question of ourselves, we can have philosophers, theologians, poets, and, yes, scientists, for our companions and conversation partners. But the question, in the end, should—must—rest with us.

Benjamin Storey is an assistant professor of political science at Furman University.