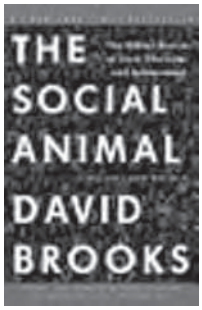
Review of *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement* by David Brooks

by Dorit Winter

David Brooks, the author of this "landmark sociological explanation of how we make decisions, how the subconscious mind drives our lives, and why some succeed and others don't,"[1] first caught my attention in his regular appearances on the PBS *Newshour*. Almost always paired with the liberal commentator, Mark Shield, Brooks has a refreshingly original cast of mind when it comes to politics. Although he anchors the conservative point of view, he always seems ideologically humanistic. He is clearly a very well-read, well-informed intellectual, whose thinking is, nevertheless, not abstract. He does not talk along straight party lines. If you read his Wikipedia page, you see that his perspectives on American foreign policy and social norms have evolved. He might even be called progressive.



Born in 1961, he is an acclaimed journalist with an impressive resumé: "David Brooks' column on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times* started in September 2003. He has been a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*, a contributing editor at *Newsweek* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. He is the author of *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* and *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense*, both published by Simon & Schuster. Mr. Brooks joined *The Weekly Standard* at its inception in September 1995, having worked at *The Wall Street Journal* for the previous nine years. His last post at the *Journal* was as op-ed editor. Prior to that, he was posted in Brussels, covering Russia, the Middle East, South Africa and European affairs. His first post at the *Journal* was as editor of the book review section, and he filled in for five months as the *Journal*'s movie critic."[2] What's interesting about this summary is that it includes an international scope and a cultural reach.

The Social Animal is a creative, intelligent, and perceptive attempt to understand what it means to be human and, in particular, what it takes to be "successful" at it. It becomes clear early in the book that success is not measured in material terms alone. To get at his thesis, Brooks invents two people to demonstrate that character determines who is successful, and that "the inner mind—the unconscious realm of emotions, intuitions, biases, longings, genetic predispositions, character traits and social norms [is] the realm where character is formed and street smarts grow" or, in other words that "we are primarily the products of thinking that happens below the level of awareness" (p.x).

Before going on to consider these two invented characters, let's have a look at Brooks' list of what constitutes the "unconscious realm." He has a string of

words there which pretty well describe astral and etheric activities. In this respect, Brooks is onto something that resonates with an anthroposophical perspective. His book presents data demonstrating that at the core of the human decision-making process there is something imponderable. Brooks ponders. What he is getting at is what, in spiritual scientific terms, we would refer to as "karma" and "ego" and "higher self." How does the Self make decisions? How does the individual prevail over circumstances, or not? Where does character come from? Such questions drive Brooks' survey of prevailing research into what makes people tick. He knows what he's doing: "I'm writing this story, first, because, while researchers in a wide variety of field have shone their flashlights into different parts of the cave of the unconscious, illuminating different corners and openings, much of their work is done in academic silos. I'm going to try to synthesize their findings into one narrative. "[3] He achieves this goal handily, in part because he does not rely solely on his findings in the silos of academia. Instead, in an unscientific leap of creative imagination, he makes up his prime subjects, Harold and Erica, and their parents, and uses them as unique but statistically credible subjects. Brooks is nothing if not witty, never biting, often hilarious, and his writing never pales, though toward the end of the book his track becomes diffused and the book became less compelling.

"We are living in the middle of a revolution in consciousness," (p.x) writes Brooks in his introduction. That is exactly what Rudolf Steiner also tells us, whether discussing the shift into the consciousness soul or the shift out of the Kali Yuga. How Brooks sees this revolution is, of course, predicated on a materialistic worldview. Nevertheless, he is keenly aware that something is missing from that worldview. "The unconscious is not merely a dark, primitive zone of fear and pain. It is also a place where spiritual states arise and dance from soul to soul. It collects the wisdom of the ages."[4] This does not sound like a materialist talking. Brooks arrives at such understanding from profound observation and consequent thought. He is a thinker, and he relies on his thinking, and it is his thinking which allows him to conclude his introduction with these words:

> If there is a divine creativity, surely it is active in this inner soul sphere, where brain matter produces emotion and where love rewires the neurons. …The unconscious…has shortcomings. It needs supervision. (p. xviii)

The vocabulary is materialistic, but not the thought. Brooks perceives the need for what anthroposophy calls an "ego." The last paragraph of his introduction is a wonderfully optimistic view of human potential and ends with: "Of all the blessings that come with being alive, it [the unconscious] is the most awesome gift." (p.xviii) You get the feeling that Brooks has been touched by something vital and vibrant. For him, "unconscious" is not a psychological term in the ordinary sense; it is akin to what spiritual science call the soul.

In making up the two characters he invents ("constructs" is probably a better word), Brooks says he is following in the steps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who invented Emile for his innovative book by that name on how humans should be educated. By inventing the biographies of Harold and Erica, but describing them as case studies rather than fictional characters, Brooks gets to annotate their every move. Along the way he analyzes just about every aspect and phase of ordinary human development.

He describes decision-making as "an inherently emotional business" (p.17), and speaks of "the role of emotions in human cognition." (p.19) This pairing of feeling and cognition is familiar to us from, to mention two sources, *Theosophy* and *Study of Man*. Brooks points out that babies do not arrive as blank slates, after all. "Starting before we are born, we inherit a great river of knowledge,

a great flow of patterns coming from many ages and many sources." (p. 32) He details the importance of touch for the newborn child. He wants to get at the connection between parents and child and declares: "Loops exist between brains. The same thought and feeling can arise in different minds, with invisible networks filling the space between them." (p. 41) Would he welcome the concept of the etheric world to expand on his idea of this invisible network?

Brooks has done a huge amount of research. His book contains 371 endnotes, mostly providing sources for his data. But the parts of the book that struck me most forcefully were the passages in which Brooks' own personal acumen, his keen unbiased insights surface. He populates the world of Harold, and the world of Erica, and then the world of Harold and Erica with a whole panoply of particular characters. Parents, teachers, friends, classmates, bosses, employees, associates... Each invented person allows Brooks to point out that our assumptions about relationships are fraught. We are caught in generic expectations. We are victimized by conscious guidelines. Yet something else seems to be guiding us.

About one of Harold's made-up high school teachers he says, "Ms. Taylor was one of those teachers who understands that schools are structured on a false view of human beings. They are structured on the presupposition that students are empty crates to be filled with information." (p.81) How often has that line been used to distinguish the contrasting Waldorf approach? And although Ms. Taylor, as Brooks imagines her, is not a Waldorf teacher, she wishes she would have been. "Human knowledge is not like data stored in a computer's memory bank." Hurrah! "Human knowledge is (p. 85)…hungry and alive." A few pages later: "Learning is not merely about accumulating facts. It is internalizing the relationships between pieces of information." (p. 89)

Brooks' descriptions of Harold's adolescent years in a typical high school and his groping, confused college years are both hilarious and spot on. He does the same for Erica, and the conclusions he draws from the data he collects to individualize these fictional people are not just realistic, but very revealing. In discussing intelligence, he comes up with: "…A thinker may be very smart but unless she possesses moral virtues such as honesty, rigor and fair-mindedness, she probably won't succeed in real life." (p. 166) I suspect that such words come from the heart of David Brooks. I get the feeling he has worked on himself, because there's no question about his intelligence. Very likely the other attributes are what enabled him to write this book. "I am not a touchy-feely person, as my wife has been known to observe," he explains in the introduction. And then he extols the inner life: "If you ignore the surges of love and fear, loyalty and revulsion that course through us every second of the day, you are ignoring the most essential realm." (p. xii)

Somehow Brooks has learned that his brain alone is not the whole of himself, and for a brain like his, schooled in the institutional world he so pithily runs down in this book, that's a terrific achievement, and I'd love to know what really happened to make him see that. It wasn't anthroposophy. It was conventional research, analyzed by an unbiased mind and a seeing heart. The thesis of his book is that uncountable conditions, many the results of our own decisions, make us what we are. But I think he must have come with a positive outlook which could not be throttled. Here is another conclusion he reaches after sifting through the data: "People who place tremendous emphasis on material well-being tend to be less happy than people who don't." Researched has proved that. We, in the chronically underfunded Waldorf world, can use that reminder. And how often, in a myriad places, does Rudolf Steiner tell us that spiritual advancement, not earthly achievement, is what counts?

"It is not merely reason that separates us from the other animals, but the advanced nature of our emotions, especially our social and moral emotions." (p. 286) Much as we can applaud yet another discerning insight, we could also wish for David Brooks that he would find personal corroboration that the world he is at such pains to elucidate does really exist, objectively and universally, and that there is data of a different sort, spiritual scientific data, to illuminate it.

In the meantime, this is one of those bridging books that can be handed to the neighbor who suspects that Waldorf education is medieval, or the niece who assumes that anthroposophy is mystical. Brooks makes it brilliantly clear that conventional education is stuck and that individual achievements come in spite of it. The achievements he highlights are, in the final analysis, equanimity, openness, and positivity. For that reason alone it behooves us to take note of him and his perspectives.

Endnotes

1. From a flyer for the Marin Speakers Series, Marin County, CA, 2011–2012.
2. http://www.nytimes.com/ref/opinion/BROOKS-BIO.html.
3. Introduction, p. xiii.
4. Introduction, p. xvi.

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