

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MIND:**

### **UNDERSTANDING HUMAN THOUGHT AND BEHAVIOR**

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This book is based on the premise that humankind is first and foremost the outcome of the process of biological evolution. Recognition of this is fundamental to our understanding of who we are and how we behave. All living things have evolved the physical and mental attributes that promote their prospects for survival; they are good at doing the things that enable them to pass on their genes to succeeding generations and we are no exception. Of course, through the development of culture we have gained some freedom from our biological origins. Nevertheless, evolution has constructed the foundation upon which culture is built.

The first part of the book, 'Ourselves Interacting with the World,' presents an overview of the main capabilities that evolution has endowed us with and that enable us to interact with the environment in advantageous ways. This begins with our senses, including seeing, hearing, touching and tasting, which act as 'windows on the world.' We then go on to consider our emotions which make possible a timely response to unexpected challenges, and our memory, which opens the way to a knowledge of the past and an ability to imagine the future. Thinking is perhaps the crowning achievement of our evolutionary journey. It enables us to construct a mental model of the world and how it works, to solve problems and decide what to do next. Thought, together with memory, sets the stage for action. We learn from the past; rewarding and punishing experiences offer a guide to what to do and what not to do in the future. One of the most remarkable attributes we possess is a sense of self which enables us to see ourselves as actors in the world. Equipped with this ability we can step into the minds of others and even empathise with them, the very foundation of social behaviour.

The second part of the book, 'Living Together,' traces the history of how we became social creatures. To be truly human we had to develop an enhanced ability to care for others, to be willing to share and cooperate. This was a development of major significance because being able to live amicably with others of our species was crucial to our survival. These newly emergent qualities did not, however, mean that we left our evolutionary past behind us. We retained, and if anything, refined our talent for deception, anger and aggressive behaviour, and these traits remain serious problems for us to this day. Nevertheless, through caring and the need to belong to the group, we were able to become trusting of one another, to agree upon values and norms of behaviour that enhanced our ability to get along. We settled down, making the transition from hunter-gatherers to urban dwellers. Ultimately, we came to see good and bad as a morality of right and wrong, further augmenting group cohesiveness. Through the development of culture, we freed ourselves, to a degree, from the biological imperatives that had gripped us. Nevertheless, we would do well to remember that in all that we think and do we still 'dance with the ghosts of the past.'

In the final part of the book, 'Challenges and Opportunities,' attention turns to a consideration of the constraints and possibilities that must be considered in looking to the future. Though we get along remarkably well, it must also be accepted that conflict of interests is a human universal; individually, we want different things and there is also the difficult challenge of balancing the interests of individuals vs. the interests of the social group as a whole. These realities can be seen to play out in four social arenas: the pursuit of fairness, the seeking of justice, the interplay of political beliefs and good government and, ultimately, a united society that is, at the same time a true community. Our quest for these things will be greatly aided by a deep knowledge and appreciation of our evolutionary past and the indelible imprint it has left upon us. Such an understanding may also lead us to that most elusive of all things, happiness.