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The Unpredictable Species: What Makes Humans Unique



Synopsis

The Unpredictable Species argues that the human brain evolved in a way that enhances our cognitive flexibility and capacity for innovation and imitation. In doing so, the book challenges the central claim of evolutionary psychology that we are locked into predictable patterns of behavior that were fixed by genes, and refutes the claim that language is innate. Philip Lieberman builds his case with evidence from neuroscience, genetics, and physical anthropology, showing how our basal ganglia--structures deep within the brain whose origins predate the dinosaurs--came to play a key role in human creativity. He demonstrates how the transfer of information in these structures was enhanced by genetic mutation and evolution, giving rise to supercharged neural circuits linking activity in different parts of the brain. Human invention, expressed in different epochs and locales in the form of stone tools, digital computers, new art forms, complex civilizations--even the latest fashions--stems from these supercharged circuits. The Unpredictable Species boldly upends scientifically controversial yet popular beliefs about how our brains actually work. Along the way, this compelling book provides insights into a host of topics related to human cognition, including associative learning, epigenetics, the skills required to be a samurai, and the causes of cognitive confusion on Mount Everest and of Parkinson's disease.

Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press (April 21, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691148589

ISBN-13: 978-0691148588

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6.5 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviewsÂ (5 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

The Unpredictable Species: what makes humans unique, 2013, by Philip Lieberman, George Hazard Cooks University Professor Emeritus at Brown University. His outlook is that: "... the human

brain evolved so as to allow us to choose between alternative courses of action and to create new possibilities "â" (p. ix). He has concluded scientific findings show our brains are not composed of independent modules or subsystems that control specific functions like a language module or vision module. Rather, we develop complicated circuits that can be brain-body wide that activate local areas of movement or perception. In this regard the basal ganglia of the brain is a very important element of such circuits even though the cortex may store instructions involved. And we have a high degree of cognitive flexibility and creativity in responding and adapting to our environment, both physical and social. As to our being the unpredictable species, he says "... we possess the ability to change the manner in which we act towards each other and how we view the world around us." We are not ruled by a genes for this and other genes for that, but rather possess genes that develop the capacity for rich cognitive flexibility and learning cultural ways. We pass on these ways to our offsprings, giving them a leg up in creativity and expand possible alternatives in relating to each other and the environment. This indeed makes us unpredictable. He also acknowledges we are just set the starting point of understanding how our brains work and how they evolved. Much of the book is polemical, as suits an emeritus professor. He slams many attempts that we can be explained in terms of innate knowledge and genetic determination.

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