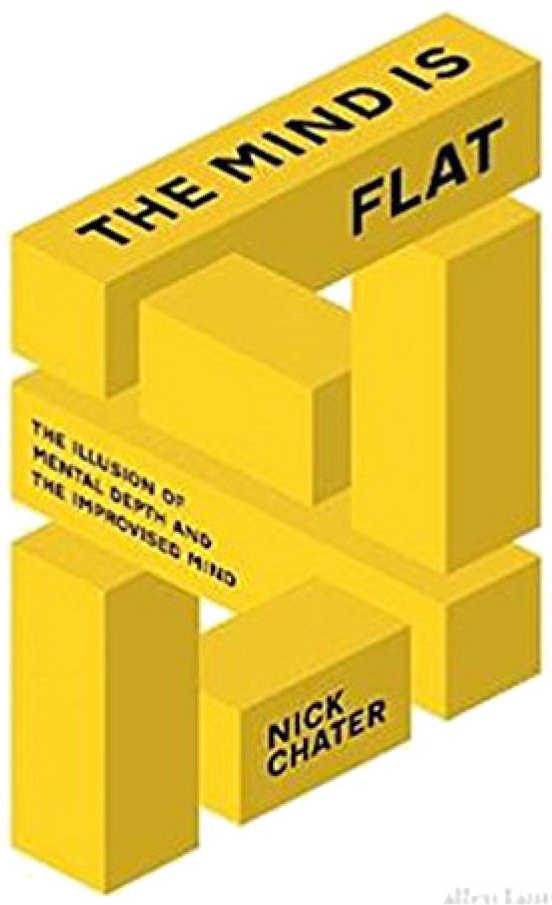
I have just finished reading Nick Chater's *The mind is flat: The illusion of mental depth and the improvised mind* (Chater 2017), which I think is an intriguing book. In contrast to popular opinion and much of modern psychology, it argues that our minds do not harbour a subconscious or unconscious that forms the source of our 'true' beliefs, emotions, motives and so forth. Instead, we spin stories on the spot to account for the way that we think, behave and feel. The coherence that emerges from these strings of justifications does not reveal our personal identity lying hidden in our mental depths. It derives from the fact that when we invent a new story about ourselves, we tend to take the stories that we created previously into account. Furthermore, we adjust our behaviour and thoughts in accordance with these stories, hence further contributing to the impression of coherence. As Chater nicely puts it, we are "shaped by stories" (p. 116), so that each individual constitutes a "tradition" (p. 202).



An important reason why we spin these stories and why we strive to maintain at least some level of coherence is that we have to be able to justify ourselves. Indeed, as Mercier and Sperber (2017) pointed out, we present beliefs and emotions as motivations to account for our behaviour. These reasons are not intended as accurate descriptions of how things are, but they are "tools for social interaction". By providing reasons, I do not only aim to justify myself but I also make a commitment. People now know which reasons I regard as acceptable motivations and will thus probably guide my behaviour in the future. By being coherent in words and deeds, one creates a reputation. However, if I am whimsical, people have no idea what to expect from me, and perhaps start to avoid me, which can have detrimental consequences for my well-being. In a social species such as ours, coherence pays off.

But where do the stories that we tell about ourselves come from? Chater doesn't pay much attention to this question. He repeatedly says that the stories are of our own creation, but certainly he doesn't

mean that they are entirely idiosyncratic. If that would be the case, then nobody would be able to understand what we are talking about. Hence, the explanations that we bring in to account for our experience and behaviour are shared socially. We pick up reasons through interaction with other people, learning what thoughts and emotions they invoke in relation to particular situations, who in their turn acquired these accounts from others and so on. In other words, the stories that we invoke to make sense of ourselves result from and become distributed through cognitive causal chains: they are cultural (Sperber 2001, Scott-Phillips, Blancke, and Heintz 2018).

However, this raises another question: why are these reasons available and not others? In order to get a scientific handle on this question, we can introduce the concept of cultural attractor. An attractor is a hypothesized point in the space of possible representations towards which representations tend to converge. In other words, it provide a handy description of what needs to be explained, namely a particular distribution of representations. In the case at hand, the justifications that people invoke to account for themselves. In other words, some reasons will be more widely available than others, so the type that they resemble we label as cultural attractor.

Mercier and Sperber (2017, p. 126) provide some indication of what types of reason can be expected to become cultural attractors. One restraint is that reasons describing our inner states cannot be entirely of the mark. As they put it, “reasons are typically constructed out of bits of psychological insight” (p. 126). For example, when I experience my body being in a state of arousal, this can either mean that I am angry, scared or horny. Depending on the context I will make sense of this arousal (to myself and others) in terms of one of these emotions. If I would say, “I shouted at the person because I was angry at him for jumping the cue”, this reason however does not provide a causal account of my behaviour (I have no experience of the mechanisms causing the arousal). However, my reason is based upon a psychological state (I label the feeling of arousal as ‘anger’) that is sufficiently recognizable by others so that they can understand it as a reason for my behaviour. As Daniel Dennett (2017, 344) notes, we came to use these reasons as “a system of user-illusions that rendered versions of our cognitive processes – otherwise as imperceptible as our metabolic processes – accessible to us for purposes of communication.” A second strategy of successful reasons is to be objective. Explaining my behaviour in terms of my subjective preferences will have only local success, if any. But reasons that do not express or serve a personal position, can, of course, be employed by a lot more people and thus stand a greater chance of becoming widely distributed (people will not accept that I take a share of the goods simply because I want it, but they will allow me to take a share that is somewhat proportional to my contribution in generating or acquiring the goods, see Baumard, André, and Sperber 2013). To sum up in the words of Mercier and Sperber (2017), reasons need to have “some degree of both psychological and social reality” (p. 126).

We are surrounded by reasons, that is, beliefs and emotions that culturally evolved as apt descriptions of people’s experiences and proper motivations for behaviour. From this range of reasons we constantly make a personal selection in which we attempt to strike a balance between the ones we think of as matching with our personal experience, and others that we think of as passable in the environment we live in (the both do not necessarily overlap) (see also Dennett 2017). Given that we tend to experience situations and behave in similar ways, and given the fact that we tend to make our current beliefs and emotions cohere with former ones, we end up with clusters of more or less similar thoughts and emotions that we label as our personal identity. Such identities or selves are, albeit small, cultural attractors. In other words, the study of personal identities cannot be a matter of psychology alone, with the focus exclusively on the reasons that individuals invoke as Chater seems to suggest. It also requires an anthropological study of the reasons that are culturally available, and the interaction between the two.

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