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Subconscious Perception

Matthew Morris

We have much less control over our perception of the world than we think. Our environment and our upbringing influence every thought we have in some way. All of these factors are taken into account by our subconscious, which then pushes us to think and act in a certain way. *Subliminal* presents the actions of the unconscious mind to us and makes us think about just how much we owe to our subconscious. By analyzing the quotes presented to us at the beginning of some chapters, we can easily reflect on how the subconscious affects our society as well as us personally.

This quote well describes the unfamiliar strength of our subconscious: “These subliminal aspects of everything that happens to us may seem to play a tiny part in our daily lives. But they are the almost invisible roots of our conscious thoughts.” (Carl Jung). Due to our nature, we like to think that we have total control over our thoughts and actions.

Interestingly, the one thing that stands in the way of total control is us, or more specifically, our subconscious. As we have discovered throughout the book, *Subliminal*, this invisible part of us plays a crucial role in nearly every aspect of our lives. This quote summarizes this concept perfectly. All of the interpretations of our environment are first run under the filter of our subconscious. When we are first introduced to somebody, we make assumptions about them. Now, some of these assumptions can be considered rude in today’s society, but everyone does it, whether they realize it or not.

These assumptions are our body’s threat assessment. They are our mind’s way of aiding in survival. Everything the subconscious does is to increase your chances of survival. The book, *The Power of Habit*, went into this as well. Habits—actions that we perform that require little to no input from our conscious mind—help us be more efficient. Instead of wasting what little conscious brain power we have on small repetitive tasks, such as stopping to tie our shoes, we can just delegate it to our subconscious mind, allowing us to focus on more pressing matters, like seeing if a bear is sneaking up on us.

On a personal level, this book has made me realize that the subconscious has influenced me in more ways than I could have imagined. Everything that has happened to me growing up has contributed to how I behave and act in some way. A bizarre, yet relevant, example that comes to mind is a memory I have of when I was much younger, around seven or eight years old. I was using the restroom during a party at my cousin's house, when someone, one of my cousins, opened the door. Instead of just closing the door as any reasonable person would, he decided to leave it open and laugh at me and call my other cousins over to laugh at me as well. While I realize that we were all young and none of us knew what we were doing or the impact it would have, it is still something that I remember very distinctly. This is an experience that has stayed with me my whole life and I believe contributed to the general shyness I have whenever going to the bathroom or whenever I'm in locker rooms. Now, while I could be completely incorrect in this assessment and could have some other underlying problems, I believe that this is due to my subconscious. In altering my bathroom habits, my subconscious is trying to protect me from experiencing that tragic and traumatizing moment again.

However traumatizing these moments may be, they still contribute to how we see the world in our current lives. "The eye that sees is not a mere physical organ but a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared." (Ruth Benedict). This is a beautiful quote. It continues to drive home the idea that our subconscious is a culmination of our past experiences, acting to increase the speed at which you can assess your environment. The actual assessment of our environment is incredible as well. Using our eyes, we can take in little waves of light and, with the help of our subconscious, turn that into something familiar. If recognizing a square isn't astounding enough for you, think about reading a book. All our eyes do is capture the light that is reflected off of the page and send that information to our brains. Then, our subconscious kicks in. It can take that light, register each letter, recognize that different combinations of letters create different words, understand what those words mean, put them together in a sentence, and put punctuation and context into account. All of this occurs almost seamlessly while you're reading.

Now, of course, with all of these different processes, there are bound to be weak spots. In our eye, it's the blind spot. For our interpretation of information, it isn't as much of a weak spot as it is an opportunity to save energy. By only interpreting a portion of the information and filling in the rest ourselves, our minds can be more efficient. That in itself is thrilling as well. The idea that when we look at a picture we think we see a whole, complete object when in reality, we're interpreting maybe a fourth of the picture and filling in the rest mentally, is fascinating.

To me, this quote means that we see people the way we are raised to see them. The most prominent example of this in my life came from my dad. My parents always made me do sports, regardless of whether or not I liked them. From the beginning, my parents were pretty strict, or in today's terms, *traditional*. Whether or not they intended to or not, they had always instilled in me that anything to do with homosexuality is wrong. Not so much that it is a sin, just that it is unnatural. Now, this was before middle school and I had no idea what being gay even meant, just that I shouldn't be it. So when my parents put me into a summer baseball team with kids who were already friends from another school, I got picked on a bit. I'm not sure I completely understood what was going on when they were picking on me, all I knew is that I didn't like it. They called me gay a few times and I associated that with being picked on and it made me mad. A couple of years later, when I played basketball in middle school, my dad pulled me aside after a really tiring game and told me that when I run with limp hands (like you might do if you've been sprinting back and forth for the last hour and a half) people would think I was gay and that would be embarrassing for him. This has stayed with me to the point that whenever I see someone "acting gay," my first thought is: "Oh, that person is not normal, and I don't want to be associated with them." Now that isn't the opinion that I continue to hold, it's just an instinct almost, that I've gotten pretty good at recognizing and stifling. I would say it's a very unhealthy mindset. All the time, I'm questioning my actions, asking things like, "Is the fact that I'm using an umbrella making me less masculine? Would a "real man" just get wet?" (This is honestly a question I've asked myself.) This line of questioning doesn't make any sense and eventually, I catch myself with these thoughts and put them behind me.

This quote further explores this idea of these "instinctual" thoughts we have: "There is a road from the eye to the heart that does not go through the intellect." (G. K. Chesterton). Small, insubstantial qualities can completely alter how we see someone. The pitch or speed of their voice can determine whether we see them as condescending or modest and intelligent. A slouched posture can make us think the person in front of us is lazy when in reality they've just stayed up all night working on their doctoral dissertation. We interpret these qualities in such a way, once again, due to our upbringing. We had an experience, an annoying teacher in primary school that just happened to have a high-pitched voice, and that led us to believe that someone we've just met is annoying, simply because of their voice. As the quote says, none of this goes through "intellect," or our conscious mind. It goes straight from our eyes, or ears in this case, straight to our heart.

The effect of our subconscious, the preconceptions that we have about someone, based on nothing, takes time to overcome. One of my closest friends "acts gay," and that was something that made me stay clear of him for a while. My instinct was to remember the experiences I had as a child where

my parents drilled the idea that “Acting gay is not normal, something is wrong with them.” Eventually, though, by creating new experiences to mask the old ones, I overcame that assumption and we became friends. Unfortunately, much like Coach Dungy’s football team forgetting their training, we often revert to our old habits and assumptions without noticing. With people like my parents, they don’t say things with ill intent. They’ve simply been raised one way and it’s difficult to go against what they’ve been taught and what’s been reinforced throughout their lives. The old saying “It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks” sums this up. To add to this, social standards change at a pace that most people cannot keep up with, hence why every generation thinks of some older generations as being intolerant, or “traditional.”

The subconscious mind is a formidable tool that shapes who we are. It is a way for our mind to use and learn from any impactful experiences that occurred in our lives. It allows us to simplify extremely complex things to make our lives easier. The books *Subliminal* and *The Power of Habit* was able to explain these concepts easily with concrete, real-life examples. It was indeed a strange experience to realize how much impact something we don't even notice can have on our lives. The books manage to work together in a way that I did not expect. *Subliminal* made me realize what habits I had when it comes to subconscious thoughts and actions, and *The Power of Habit* gave me the means of changing those habits if need be. The combinations of these books have made an already potent tool more controllable, and therefore more powerful.