

“Mind over Reality Theory”: A New Explanation for Unusual Features of Human Evolution.

Available data indicate that self-awareness (knowledge of one's own personhood) and rudimentary theory of mind (ToM, also termed mind-reading, multilevel intentionality etc.) have independently emerged several times in certain mammals (cetaceans, elephants and great apes) and birds (corvids and passerines). Thus, warm-blooded long-lived social species have had the potential for achieving such states for tens of millions of years. Despite this long-standing opportunity, only humans progressed further to evolve a full and extended ToM, a trait required for the optimal expression of numerous other unique attributes of our species. The conventional explanation for this singularity is that these unique features of human cognition arose via stepwise positive selection of multiple traits that were immediately beneficial to our ancestors. The Mind over Reality Theory introduces a counterintuitive alternate possibility, that emergence of full theory of mind has been repeatedly obstructed in all other species with the potential to achieve it, due to a "psychological evolutionary barrier"—until our ancestors finally broke through by hitting upon a rare and unlikely combination of cognitive changes, in which two intrinsically maladaptive traits combined to allow a “Mind over Reality” transition. Once the barrier was broken, conventional natural selection took over, with further evolution of beneficial aspects of the initial changes. This theory provides a unifying evolutionary explanation for some unusual features of humans:

- Full and extended “theory of mind”.
- Ability for facile reality denial, even when aware of facts.
- Strong tendency for self-deception and false beliefs.
- Overarching optimism bias.
- Irrational risk-taking behavior.
- Recent emergence as the dominant species on the planet, making use of the above attributes.
- Replacement of all other closely related evolutionary cousins, with limited interbreeding.

While not directly falsifiable, the theory fits very well with numerous known facts arising from many areas of knowledge about humans and human origins, and no known fact militates against it. It is also consistent with most other currently viable theories on the subject. Importantly it has major implications for the human condition, as well as for many serious issues, from personal responsibilities to global climate change.

Varki, A. 2009. Human uniqueness and the denial of death. *Nature*. 460:684.

Varki, A., and Brower, D. 2013. *Denial: Self-Deception, False Beliefs, and the Origins of the Human Mind*. Twelve Books, New York