

Talking Point: Week 6

This week, we focused on how incredible complexity can emerge in the absence of design - where do languages, cultures and societies come from?

Termites, which are incredibly simple beings, manage together to build nests which are much more complex than any of them individually. Humans are similar - we are living in a world that is massively more complex than any of us can understand. How is this possible?

One way in which this occurs, we suggested, is by a process of cultural evolution.

- In analogy with biological evolution, the idea of cultural evolution is that aspects of cultural change are evolved by a process of cultural selection. Just as those genes that make an organism more likely to reproduce evolve over time, the ideas and practices that are most easily passed on from person to person also become more and more prominent.

An example of cultural evolution at work is in the development of complex languages.

- A popular explanation of where language comes from is that it's built into us, that it's innate. The details may not be fixed, but our genes determine the general structure of language patterns.
- The problem with this explanation is that it doesn't really account for how languages change over time and why they are different from group to group. An alternative explanation is that we invent languages collectively, and they evolve over time through cultural selection.
- Individuals are often reinventing the words and phrases of a language in slightly different ways - reinventions that work well get propagated, and those that work less well get eliminated.
- The reason languages are so easy for us to learn is that they've been ruthlessly selected by cultural evolution to be as easy to learn as possible - obviously languages that are easy to learn will be more likely to get passed on.

All kinds of conventions, rules, and laws, have, we suggest, evolved through a similar process of cultural selection. What's strange about all of these things is that no-one ever planned them, no-one fully understands how they work, but we all seem to be able to learn rules and conventions extraordinarily well.

A second way in which complexity can emerge in the absence of design is by the operation of markets - means that each of the individuals in a market economy can contribute to the

welfare of others even when following their own self-interests. Prices convey information that orders activities in the economy appropriately.

Tying all of this back to the “Mind is Flat” perspective, the idea is that the meaning and justification of many of the things we do comes from the complicated patterns of language, convention, culture and society - not from inside our own minds.

Finally, we also talked about the implications of the “Mind is Flat” view for thinking about what makes a ‘good society.’

- One intuitively compelling perspective is the utilitarian idea that a good society is one which maximises the happiness of each individual. But if happiness is purely relative, and we can’t measure how happy any individual is, how can we actually try to maximise individual happiness in practice? Does the idea even make sense?
- Another appealing political perspective is liberalism - the idea that freedom is a basic virtue, that people should be free to do what they want. This of course requires that I have a stable sense of what I do want - an assumption that this course has challenged.

One particularly troubling thought is that, since we’re obviously influenced by societal norms, the kind of society we want to build will itself be shaped by the kind of society we’re in - which is a dangerous kind of circularity.