DEVELOPING THE EXPERIENCE OF GROUP MIND *

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Is the human mind [...] like a dark cavern (needing illumination)? A muscle (needing exercise)? A vessel (needing filling)? A lump of clay (needing shaping)? A garden (needing cultivation)? Or, as so many say today, is it like a computer that processes data?

Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (1995) (1)

It is true enough that our ways of talking are controlled by the ways we manage our minds, and no one is quite sure what "mind" is.

Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (1995) (2)

My name is Ben Hauck, and I'm pleased to be the first speaker to kick off *The Mind and Consciousness Seminar Series*. I will be focusing on the "mind" part of that title. My opening question is that popular one, "What is the mind?" I hope not to bore you with any kind of abstract, intangible theory about what it is. Instead, I want to make you think. And I say that with a little wink.

What *is* the mind? Can we point to it, extract it, and dissect it like a frog? You can, if you define the term "the mind" as "the brain." However, often when we speak

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of the mind, we don't mean the brain. Sometimes, we mean something amorphous, ephemeral, non-substantive; something abstract; something almost ghostly. I used to think of "the mind" as a ghostly brain that inheres in the actual brain, or even "floats" in there, so to speak. But that is not the idea I aim to forward.

Before providing my answer to the question "What is the mind?" I wish to provide you with a pool of examples employing the use of the word "mind." In these examples, the word mind is *not* a synonym for the word "brain." It is also *not* a synonym for "pay attention to" or "care about," as in the statements "Mind your manners" and "I don't mind if you wear your shoes in the house." Here are some examples of the sense of the word "mind" that I am talking about. As you listen, see if you can figure out what is meant by the word mind—what it refers to.

Examples:

- What's on your mind?
- Are you out of your mind?
- Your name…Remind me again?
- I'll keep it in mind.
- I'm losing my mind.
- I'm changing my mind.
- That totally blew my mind!
- Free your mind!
- Make up your mind!
- I'm going to give him a piece of my mind.
- Finishing your first marathon requires mind over matter.
- Ladies and gentlemen, cast your mind back to better times.
- There is a connection between mind and body.

In these examples, what does the word "mind" refer to? Did you figure out some answers?

Some more sophisticated examples employing the sense of the word mind follow.

- "*All paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind."* (Aristotle)
- "*The human mind treats a new idea the same way the body treats a strange protein; it rejects it."* (P.D. Medawar)
- "*The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."* (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

- "*How hard it is, sometimes, to trust the evidence of one's senses! How reluctantly the mind consents to reality."* (Norman Douglas)
- "*I have not lost my mind - it's backed up on disk somewhere."* (Unknown) (3)

When we use the word "mind" in the senses I've outlined, we treat it as if it's a thing. However, I find it erroneous to do so. What we call "the mind" is *not* a thing. The term "the mind" stands for a human behavior we call *thinking*. Thinking is a behavior. Behavior is not a thing. It is something a thing *does*.

When you make a thing out of behavior, you've practiced *reification*. I will use a more vivid word: I will refer to the practice of making a thing out of behavior as *embodiment*. When you embody a behavior, you make that behavior a thing. By making thinking a thing like "the mind," you embody thinking. You make something that is not concrete into something that is concrete. Note this is something *you* do. It's probably fine to do it as an artistic, poetic choice; however, the territory does not change because you opted for an artistic, poetic model of thinking. Thinking remains a behavior and does not suddenly become a concrete thing.

There are certain negative logical consequences of embodying thinking, making it a thing called "the mind." For one, by making thinking a thing and not seeing it as a behavior, we then *look* for a thing. We spend time and money on trying to find the mind, as if there is some concrete thing to find.

A different negative logical consequence of embodying thinking, making it a thing called "the mind," is that we may partially and unnecessarily lose faith in science. The argument flows something like this: *Science studies only observable phenomena. The mind is definitely there, but we can't see it. Since we can't observe the mind because it can't be seen, science can't tell us about the mind. And the mind is very important. So science ultimately fails us.* This argument is akin to some theistic arguments against science. But note that the argument hinges on embodying a behavior. The person loses faith in science by chasing a red herring.

I find it false-to-fact to consider the mind as a thing. Instead, it is truer and more extensional to see the mind as strictly *human behavior*—specifically, as *thinking* behavior.

Examples:

Originals:	**Revisions:**
What's on your mind?	What are you thinking?
Are you out of your mind?	You aren't thinking as you usually do.
Your name… Remind me again?	Your name… Make me think it again?
I'll keep it in mind.	I'll keep thinking it.
I'm losing my mind.	I'm losing track of what I think.
I'm changing my mind.	I'm changing what I think.
That totally blew my mind!	I had never, ever thought of that!
Free your mind!	Free your thinking!
Make up your mind!	Decide what you think!
I'm going to give him a piece of my mind.	I'm going to give him my thinking (my thoughts).
Finishing your first marathon requires mind over matter.	Finishing your first marathon requires thinking more than it requires matter (muscle).
Ladies and gentlemen, cast your mind back to better times.	Ladies and gentlemen, think back to better times.
There is a connection between mind and body.	There is a connection between thinking and body.

Let's revisit the examples that I gave earlier. I'll rephrase each example in terms of thinking. Feel free to figure out your own rewording of mind-based sentences into thinking-based sentences. If you can rephrase the mind-sentence in terms of thinking, you're on the right track.

Basically, I've translated these sentences from mind-terms to thinking-terms. Though occasionally ineloquent, I think you will find they are on target. The translations reflect that when a person talks of his mind, he really means *his thinking*. He means a behavior; he does not mean a thing. He hasn't literally lost some thing. He hasn't literally changed some thing. What he's lost or changed was *behavior*—he's lost or changed his *thinking* behavior. When you hear a person use the word mind—and he doesn't mean brain or care about—translating the word into thinking-terms may help you to understand that the person is talking about his thinking and not some strange unobservable thing.

When you appreciate the mind as thinking behavior rather than as a thing, you

can then *develop* the mind. *Developing your mind merely means developing your thinking.* How do you develop your thinking? Like many different behaviors, you work at it. You train. You *condition*. You look at the choices you naturally make in your thinking and evaluate their efficacy. Or maybe you add more choices. Being open-minded or close-minded merely means you have open thinking or closed thinking. You have a narrow mind? You *think* narrowly. You have a broad mind? You *think* broadly. Such thinking largely results from *choices* you make—to open your mind or close it, to narrow your mind or broaden it. And that thinking can be trained.

Thinking refers not just to one behavior, but instead it is a word that stands for lots of different behaviors. You may call all of the following behaviors thinking: *comparing, contrasting, evaluating, weighing, poeticizing, mathematizing, exaggerating, expecting, speculating, deducing, ruminating, hoping, dreaming, believing, fantasizing, digesting, processing, guessing, checking, hypothesizing, theorizing, calculating, plotting, rationalizing, dramatizing,* etc. The word thinking at best is a very general word, and at worst a very vague one. When you say you're thinking, you may be performing one operation like contrasting, or you may be performing a number of operations like contrasting, poeticizing, then rationalizing and guessing. So narrowing the word mind down to mean thinking is not as limiting as it sounds. It makes the word mind stand for a diversity of human behaviors that happen under the skin.

Now, with all that I've just said as background—that request for you to see the mind not as a thing but instead as thinking behavior—I will now transition to the major focus of my talk: Something that I do, which is to train people to improvise on the stage before an audience. I train people in *improvisation.*

In improvisation, there is a coveted concept called the group mind. To those who have experienced the group mind, it is rather amazing. But it is a rare experience, not to mention one shrouded in mystery. It is not something that the typical improviser is trained in. Instead, it tends to just happen to improvisers. It's something left to chance or explained away as occurring at the right moment or a happy accident. It could be said that, to date, little is understood about the group mind.

It comes up in group improvisation. A group of say seven actors are performing an improvised theatrical show. During this show, the improvisers may have the experience of thinking exactly what the other actors are thinking then *instantaneously doing* what the other group members also want to do. Much to their delight, everyone in the group will later confirm this simultaneous experience. During the experience, there is astounding physical coordination amongst them as they perform; yet they did not work anything out between them. The improvisers all automatically complement each other's performances flawlessly without cues. The audience may

note the astounding coordination and reward it with laughter and applause, or the achievements may go unnoticed except privately amongst the improvisers. This surreal experience, which comes spontaneously without any kind of communication between or amongst the improvisers, is referred to as the emergence of group mind.

Knowing what we now know about the meaning of the word mind, the mysterious emergence of group mind is really the emergence of *group thinking*. The experience of group mind is the experience of meeting up at a store's lost and found after losing the person with whom you went to the store. It is the experience of people in a town, with no direct communication, showing up at the same place the morning after a tornado has ripped the town apart. The experience of group mind is the experience of coordinating with others when there is no communication aiding their coordination. It is successfully thinking what everyone else is thinking without talking to them, pointing to them, or otherwise cueing them.

How does this happen? How does group mind emerge? In part, its emergence has to do with your answer to the question: *What do I expect everyone else in the group will do in this situation?* When communication is prohibited with the others in the group, you typically arrive at your answer based on what you know about your fellow group members. If you do not know the people in your group too well, you will probably have a more difficult time coordinating with them than if you do know them well.

Concurrently, the others in the group are asking the same question: *What do I expect everyone else in the group will do in this situation?* That question includes *their* guessing what *you* would do. Provided they are prohibited from communicating with you, if the others in your group don't know you that well, they may have a harder time coordinating with you than if they did know you well. You then find in choosing your answer that you have to guess what they would guess you would guess, *considering their lack of information about you*. As a result, you may start to second-guess your original answer, or you may want to give a completely different answer in light of that reality. Your simple predicament becomes suddenly more complicated. Group coordination without communication can get tricky. It may start to seem impossible.

But as the improv experience of group mind demonstrates, as well as the famed game theorist and recipient of the 2005 Nobel Prize for Economics Thomas Schelling demonstrates, it is far from impossible. In his 1960 book *The Strategy of Conflict* (4), Schelling writes about *tacit coordination*—that is, coordination amongst people prohibited to communicate with each other. He demonstrates and concludes, albeit unscientifically, that, in general, human beings *can* coordinate without the aid of communication amongst them as long as they know that their aim as a group is to coordinate.

Through a series of informal tests he conducted on groups of people, Schelling built up his evidence. The following is a test similar to ones he used. In it, a group of people is instructed to follow the instruction without communicating amongst themselves.

Circle a number. If you all circle the same number, you all win a prize.

5 18 100 99 52 62

For this problem and for others Schelling stipulated there is no correct answer. Instead, there might be a correct answer. A correct answer is an answer that most people in the group circle. (The quotation marks around the word are important.)

If 15 out of 20 people circle "5," then "5" would presumably be the "correct" answer to this problem. If 17 out of 20 people circle "62," then "62" would be the "correct" answer. If, in a group of 6 people, everyone circled a different number, there would be no "correct" answer for that problem. Having the group of 6 try again, they might be able to find a "correct" answer. Schelling showed that there was relativity to correctness in coordination problems, and no absolutely correct answer.

Schelling said that *prominence* seemed to be the main principle used for finding the "correct" answer and coordinating among the groups he tested. For example, it would not be surprising to see a majority of people circling "5," as it is the first number in the series. By virtue of being first from the left, it takes on a certain prominence for many people.

However, if the group of people had just finished singing "99 Bottles of Beer," the number "99" might gain prominence for the majority and have more prominence than the first number. You could summarize this variation in prominence by saying that prominence depends somewhat on the experience or culture of the group. Ask a group of Connecticut residents where to rendezvous in New York City without communicating, and they would very likely choose Grand Central Station over other places because of their orientation to NYC via train. (Schelling tested some Connecticut residents and got this answer.) However, ask a group of NYC improvisers, and a more likely answer for their point of coordination is their rehearsal space. (In my tests with improvisers, I've frequently gotten this answer.) Grand Central Station isn't as prominent to the improvisers as their rehearsal space is. And to Connecticut residents, there is no logic in meeting at a specific Manhattan rehearsal studio.

How do Schelling's insights into tacit coordination help a group of improvisers develop a group mind? How does it lend to its emergence? Schelling's insights mean for me as an improv teacher that I need to train improvisers to build experiences

together, whether they be in class or outside of class. The more shared experiences the improvisers have together, the more likely they will be able to see the same things as prominent. When onstage, they would then be able to coordinate without communication more readily and more often, facilitating the emergence of group mind and its respective performance rewards. From my view, Schelling essentially measured the group-mindedness of sets of people. And in measuring their group-mindedness, he showed how to *develop* group-mindedness. No longer would the emergence of group mind be relegated to chance and mystery.

To develop their group mind, I first encourage groups of improvisers not just to show up to every practice, but also to show up on time, to hang out together after class, to go to their shows together, to get involved in each others' lives, etc. They build shared experiences by doing this. "Ninety-nine" becomes prominent to those who shared singing the song on the bus together, 99 means nothing special to those who missed the bus.

To develop a group's group mind, sometimes I isolate certain things that come up in improvised scenes and label them as important. For example, one of the things I urge my improvisers to pay attention to are the desires of the characters, to help every character get what she wants. A desire serves as a call to action. When a character spontaneously says, "I want to eat a ham sandwich," an improviser in the scene may immediately step forward and establish for the audience that the troupe is in a deli, while another improviser may simultaneously posture behind a pantomimed counter, asking "Sir, can I take yer order?" Still another improviser may enter the scene, simply oinking. By saying character wants are important, they become prominent, and improvisers focus on them. They then all do things in line with satisfying those wants.

Then there's the testing for the presence of group mind. For me, the measure of a great group mind is the measure of how well the improvisers in a group are able to coordinate tacitly. That is, how often do they coordinate around the same answer without communicating? From time to time I give groups of improvisers tests similar to Schelling's, having them all seated in a circle, a small distance apart, their backs to each other. After they all finish, I go around the room and compare their answers, looking for "correct" answers and how many improvisers answered "correctly." Sometimes I even give the groups a second try at answering a problem if there is a lot of variation in their initial answers. It is my belief that if a group is able to find "correct" answers to a multitude of problems without communicating, then that group has a strong group mind and will readily have more group mind emerges during their shows. Where there is variation in answers to coordination questions, there is reason to believe there is a weaker group mind for the group and less chance at achieving a group mind during their shows.

Training the group mind becomes training in the group to coordinate as perfectly as possible to achieve the same answer every time *the first time*. As a result, without communication, the group will perform improvisation mysteriously well, the magic behind their excellence simply a developed ability to recognize what's prominent in any given situation and going in that prominent direction.

Audiences frequently are astounded when improvisers take spontaneous coordinated action without any seeming preparation. They can't figure out how it works onstage. After a show, it's not uncommon for audience members to *insist* that the show *must* have been prepared beforehand. The emergence of group mind usually baffles even the best improvisers. They can't figure out how it comes about. For me, it comes about naturally and readily from having shared experiences. It also comes when certain aspects are labeled as important so that everyone in the improv group sees them as prominent.

With regard to the terms mind and group mind, I hope I have provided you with some ideas you will put to use. That we have all listened today to these ideas means we have shared an experience. And as I see it, we've also come one step closer to developing a group mind.

References

1. Postman, Neil. *The End of Education*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. p. 174.
2. *Ibid*. p. 122.
3. These five quotations come from the website QuotationsPage.com, retrieved January 2008.
4. Schelling, Thomas C. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980. pp. 53-80.