

Filling in the Gaps

RMS — THE WHITESPACE ON THE WORLD'S BLACKBOARDS

As a computer scientist like most of our readership, I make a living out of the ability to reduce realities to abstractions. This might help if you had a weird obsession with knapsacks or non-stationary vendors. But how does one go about real-life problems?

Basics

Given how a human's brain has more than 10^{11} neurons (vertices with an average degree of 7000), one would think that we'd manage to find solutions to all kinds of problems, or at least scrape by. Let's be honest here, if we managed to solve complex mathematical problems and recall embarrassing family reunions from our childhoods, why can't we manage the most basic of tasks?

they go left. Then they go right and you go right. And everybody laughs a bit and goes on their merry way. Why?

Social psychologists revel in intuitively unexplainable phenomena like this—after all, we manage to avoid this situation more than 99% of the time. Research suggests that usually, both subjects would try to subconsciously judge the other's intended walking direction based on their viewing direction, and the cha-cha-cha oc-

«Light travels faster than sound.
That's why most people seem bright
until you hear them speak.»

– Unknown

The Metropolitan cha-cha-cha

Or, as research would call it, "Bidirectional collision-avoidance behaviour of pedestrians". You walk down the pavement and encounter a person coming towards you. So you go left, and

curs if the subjects chose to do this at the same exact time. This would of course lead to the situation where none can make any judgement, as both are staring exactly at each other, and neither to the left or right.



The unconscious mind (or: Dual-Core Humans)

Quite scary, if you think about it: You act on more knowledge than you are consciously aware of. Need to recognize someone's face? You can handle it in about 150ms (some psychologists flashed up images to experimental subjects to find this experimentally). Need to judge how well the genes of your conversational partner complement yours? Your unconscious will tell you all about it by analysing visual and even olfactory clues.

No, I'm not joking

Now to me, that is already pretty scary. Thing is, even now that you are consciously aware of the actions the other half of your brain takes, you can't do anything about it. And really, why would you want to? After all, it controls your breathing and doesn't keep reminding you that your nose is in fact in the way of your area of view—well, not too often.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder...is unconscious

The most wondrous thing is, however, that the same villain in between your ears also tells you who to fall in love with. People who were romantically unappealing before are elevated to higher physical attractiveness through their actions, regardless of their unaltered exterior.

If your curiosity has been tickled, I highly recommend you check out one of the excellent books below. ◇

References

Geoffrey Miller: *The Mating Mind*
(ISBN 978-0385495172)

Earl Naumann: *Love at First Sight: The Stories and Science Behind Instant Attraction*
(ISBN 978-1570718496)