

### **Anatomy of the Noosphere: Segment 3**

**David Sloan Wilson:** Okay, so one way to think about cooperation is still quite individualistic. We think of individuals cooperating, but remaining individuals in their own mind and thought processes. Then we can think about cognition itself has becoming a group process, something like a group mind. That sounds like science fiction, until you start to study the social insects. We have wonderful work, by people like Tom Seeley and Deborah Gordon, in which really the idea of the individual as being a bit more like a neuron than a decision-making unit in its own right, is actually very well documented. In the early days of social psychology, as you know, it was more customary to think that way.

The last 50 years has been an age of individualism, methodological individualism in the social sciences, but it's coming back. I have a paper here, a psychological review paper, by Garriy Shteynberg, and others, 'Shared worlds and shared minds: A theory of collective learning and a psychology of common knowledge', which basically talks about all forms of cognition. Perception, memory, decision-making, all of these things, which we axiomatically think of as our individualistic processes. Well, no, not at all. Even at the smaller group level, these things are really collective.

I'd like to have your thoughts on this idea of collective intelligence, group mind. First at the small scale, something that basically evolved as part of the package of human cognition, and then we can expand it, to technology of course, to talk about global brain, and things like that. What that might mean. But first at the small-scale. So do you think about kind of collective intelligence in this way? Have you done much thinking about that, Lesley first and then Peter?

**Lesley Newson:** Well, I tried to use a story in our book to help people understand how having, even a million and a half years ago, having a collective consciousness, could be really practically useful. So it was talk, we were talking about how a group of humans had to go out and be a group. And in that way, they were able to fight off scary animals. Like what happened in our story is that there were three hyenas who brought down a buffalo and they were standing on it.

And the early humans needed to get some of that meat. And so they needed to scare the hyenas off, and the hyenas were much bigger than they were, but by working as a group all shouting together, all having confidence in themselves as not a bunch of individuals, but as a giant, noisy, confident, big animal. As long as they kept that in their mind that they were that together, that they could scare off these large hyenas. I mean, of course we have no idea if this happened a million and a half years ago, but we can easily see how it would have been useful. And so go from that to lots of other things. But that ability would have been useful for us and remains useful for us.

**DSW:** Great. Thank you. Peter?

**Peter Richerson:** Well, on the cognitive side, Rob and I think of human groups as a problem-solving collective via the creation of culture. So if each of us had to create our culture for ourselves, it would be an impossible task. Learning is expensive. So what we do in effect is share out the task of learning among all of us. Everybody's trying to learn. And if I make a small improvement in the mouse trap, I can communicate that to the rest of my group, and someone else in turn can make another modification that improves it. So each of us does a little bit of work in creating and learning, but we share it. And so the otherwise impossible task of creating a complicated technology or a complicated social organization is a shared task.

So the idea of calling this collective consciousness or something like that, if that term appeals to you, I'm happy with that. But it seems to me that the concrete aspect of it is that the task of innovation and curation of ideas is a shared task operating through our extensive social networks and through time. So we inherit the culture of our ancestors and often make little improvements on it and transmit those improvements.

Now, a second thing that I think is important, that's the sort of the cognitive side, if you want. On the emotional side, people form attachments to the social groups that they belong to. I think you've alluded to that, David. There's this field of social psychology called social identity theory. And the thrust of it is that our own private identities are in part social. We are emotionally the groups that we belong to. You see this in phenomena like sports fandom. I mean, it's pretty crazy, but so professional sports are in the business of selling a tribal identity to you.

If you buy into being a fan of a particular pro sports team, I mean, it's emotionally salient to lots of people. Rob, for example, was a 49ers football fan because his father took him to games when he was a kid and he got into it really early. And in the heyday of the 49ers, he could barely watch a 49ers football game live because he was so emotionally upset when they lost. Of course, he was emotionally thrilled when they won, but there was this social bond and with a host of other fans that was completely impersonal.

So you get the phenomenon of tailgating parties on the parking lots of the stadium where people literally collect, or they collect in the stadium itself to cheer their team on. It's a sort of an ersatz tribal identity that's cleverly peddled to sports fans by entrepreneurs who stand to make a lot of money out of your desire to belong to a tribe.

**LN:** Do you think this is a modern phenomenon? Because we don't have such a strong identity nowadays because we're always moving around and meeting different people that we're kind of so desperate to fall in love, that we're quite vulnerable to joining other groups or do you think this is something that was always the case? I don't know.

**PR:** Well, I think that the tribal identities were the primitive, or original form of this, and in modern societies, tribes themselves have gone away, but we have all of these quasi-tribal systems. And I think as David said, we can belong to several of these. You can be a 49ers football fan and a patron of the arts and an anthropologist. You can belong to, a Democrat or a Republican, and you can belong to and identify with, I don't know if it's an unlimited number of groups, but certainly multiple groups.

**DSW:** Well, the whole origin of sports in Greece, for example, was another one of these deliberate constructions in order to actually stitch together cooperation to the larger scale that you'd be fielding sports teams rather than warring with each other and so on. So I think that it plays a role in social physiology. The tribe becomes actually a part of something larger and the competition takes a benign form and so on and so forth. So there's much of interest to be said there.