

SUBCONSCIOUS BLUNDERS

A 21st-CENTURY EPIDEMIC

KLAUS TRUEMPER



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Contents

1	<i>Introduction</i>	1
	<i>Examples of Subconscious Errors</i>	1
	<i>Central Role of Subconscious Output</i>	2
	<i>Evolution</i>	3
	<i>Profit Motive</i>	4
	<i>Remedy</i>	5
	<i>Prior Work</i>	6
	<i>Use of the Book</i>	7
2	<i>Nervous System</i>	9
	<i>Architecture</i>	10
	<i>Neuroprocesses</i>	11
	<i>Grouping of Errors</i>	13
 Part I Body		15
3	<i>Cold and Hot</i>	17
	<i>Correct Interpretation</i>	17
4	<i>Models</i>	19
	<i>Models Created by Neuroprocesses</i>	20
	<i>Direct Actions</i>	21
	<i>Enlarged Diagram</i>	21

5	<i>Creation of Models</i>	23
	<i>Model Errors</i>	23
6	<i>Remedy</i>	25
	<i>Effect of Conscious Thoughts</i>	25
	<i>Main Claim</i>	26
	<i>Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)</i>	26
	<i>Changing Direct Action</i>	27
	<i>Enlarged Diagram</i>	27
	<i>Two Rivers</i>	28
	<i>Correction of Negative Feelings and Thoughts</i>	28
7	<i>Food and Drink</i>	31
	<i>Enteric Nervous System (ENS)</i>	31
8	<i>Sugar, Fat, and Salt</i>	33
	<i>Reaction to Sugar, Fat, and Salt</i>	33
	<i>Food Manipulation</i>	34
	<i>Optimization</i>	34
	<i>Harmful Effects</i>	35
9	<i>A Health Crisis</i>	36
	<i>Obesity</i>	36
	<i>Buying Food and Drink</i>	37
	<i>Decisions, Decisions</i>	37
	<i>Fast Food</i>	38
	<i>More on Decisions</i>	39
	<i>Counter Arguments</i>	39
	<i>Yes, It's Like Alcoholism</i>	40

	<i>Specific Plans</i>	41
	<i>A Deceptive Claim</i>	41
10	<i>Breathless</i>	44
	<i>A COPD Case</i>	44
	<i>Role of Neuroprocesses</i>	45
	<i>Major Blunder</i>	46
	<i>Downward Spiral</i>	47
	<i>Correct Explanation</i>	48
	<i>Correct Response</i>	48
	<i>Results</i>	49
	<i>Benefits for Everyone</i>	50
11	<i>Fatigue</i>	52
	<i>First Explanation</i>	52
	<i>Second Explanation</i>	53
	<i>Emotion</i>	53
	<i>Appropriate Reaction</i>	54
	<i>Sports</i>	54
	<i>Aviation</i>	55
	<i>Temporary Replacement of Feelings</i>	57
12	<i>Pain</i>	58
	<i>Shoulder Injury</i>	58
	<i>Explanation</i>	59
	<i>Low Back Pain</i>	59
	<i>Pain and Pleasure</i>	60

13 *A Flood of Drugs* 62

Fentanyl 63

Fosamax 63

Obesity Drugs 66

14 *Alternatives* 68

Rational Reaction 69

Folk Medicine 70

Summary 70

Part II *Mind* 73

15 *Mind Definition* 75

16 *A Dead-Sure Investor* 77

Strategy 1: Buy and Sell Stocks 77

Strategy 2: Buy and Hold Stocks 78

Strategy 3: Take Lump Sum Instead of Pension 79

Explanation 80

17 *Bad Advice* 82

18 *Mistakes* 84

Investment in Individual Stocks 84

Investment in the Company Where You Work 85

Supposedly Safe Investment With High Return 86

19 *Solution* 87

First Step: How to Invest 88

Second Step: How to Reject Tempting Choices 91

Helping Others 93

Harmful Optimization 94

20	<i>Digital Media</i>	95
21	<i>Economics and Evolution</i>	97
	<i>Advertising</i>	98
	<i>Domestication</i>	98
	<i>Economics</i>	99
	<i>Greed for New Information</i>	99
	<i>Activating and Maintaining the Greed</i>	100
22	<i>Escape From Profit Media</i>	102
	<i>Solution</i>	102
	<i>Getting Started</i>	105
23	<i>Meditation</i>	106
	<i>Restoring Curiosity</i>	106
	<i>Mindfulness</i>	107
	<i>Relaxation</i>	108
	<i>Anger Management</i>	108
	<i>Escape From Profit Media</i>	109
 Part III Life 111		
24	<i>Getting Old</i>	113
	<i>Shortcomings of Evolution</i>	114
25	<i>Staying Young</i>	115
	<i>The Plan</i>	116
	<i>Satisfaction</i>	117
	<i>Benefits</i>	117
	<i>Retirement</i>	118

26	<i>Ikigai</i>	119
	<i>Beyond This Book</i>	120

Part IV	121
---------	-----

	<i>Epilogue</i>	123
	<i>A Personal Note</i>	124

	<i>Notes</i>	125
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	<i>Bibliography</i>	137
--	---------------------	-----

	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	140
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	<i>Index</i>	141
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1

Introduction

Our nervous system—the brain, the spinal cord, and the network of nerves—delivers an astonishing performance. The *conscious mind*¹ is the top part of that wondrous system. The rest is the *subconscious*. It supplies the input for the conscious mind.

In recent decades, several forces have spurred the subconscious of virtually everyone to produce vast amounts of erroneous input to the conscious. It truly is an epidemic of subconscious errors.

Let's look at some examples.

Examples of Subconscious Errors

- Every day, John spends hours on Facebook and Twitter.² When he publishes a post, he feels compelled to check every few minutes whether others have commented favorably.
- Two hours after a meal, John feels hungry and needs to eat again. In response, he fetches a snack.
- During an annual physical exam, the doctor tells John that his cholesterol is way up, as is his blood pressure. The doctor prescribes two pills. John agrees to take them to fix these problems.

The three situations have in common that a feeling or unbidden thought triggers an erroneous decision. Let's see:

- The feeling “I wonder what others think about my post” impels John to check for “likes” every few minutes. He is disappointed when only a few have cared to respond.
Result: He becomes depressed.
- The feeling of hunger two hours after a meal causes him to overeat.
Result: His weight goes up and up.
- The unbidden thought “Good that medication can fix this” triggers John’s acceptance of the doctor’s recommendation.
Result: The drugs have nasty side effects. John has muscle pain and feels dizzy and weak.

Where do the feelings and unbidden thoughts come from? They certainly aren’t the result of deliberate thinking since they just pop up. Well, they come from the subconscious. Their key characteristic is that they show up without any perceivable justification. They simply *happen*. They result in major harm in each of the cited cases. Are there more situations of this kind? Yes, indeed, we are engulfed in them. Here’s why.

Central Role of Subconscious Output

How does the conscious mind obtain any information about the body or the world? There is only one way: The subconscious must produce the information in the form of feelings and unbidden thoughts.

How can this be? Don’t we directly see things, hear words, sense heat, touch surfaces, taste food, and so on?

Yes, it does seem that we directly accomplish this, doesn’t it? Actually, in each case subconscious processes make the conscious sensation possible.

For example, when photons enter the eyes, subconscious processes convert the information into signals and send them to a portion of

the brain where other subconscious processes analyze the information and eventually assemble an image that pops up in consciousness.

As far as the conscious mind is concerned, the image shows up without any deliberate effort. But it actually results from very sophisticated subconscious processing. Technically, we consider the image to be part of the unbidden thoughts that the subconscious outputs to the conscious mind.

Whenever the subconsciously produced feelings and thoughts are flawed, the conscious mind operates on the basis of incorrect information and arrives at wrong or harmful decisions and actions.

How often does the subconscious create erroneous output? Right now, in the 21st century, lots and lots of times.

We focus on two causes: evolution, or rather a lack of appropriate evolution, and actions of our profit-driven economic system.

Evolution

The human race, with all its capabilities and frailties, is the end result of millions of years of evolution. During that vast period, the world changed substantially a number of times. The changes happened at a pace slow enough that evolution could track them, in the sense that organisms either adapted or were replaced. That included the development of the human race, where *Homo sapiens* was the final outcome.

For the last 10,000 years, humans have caused changes at a much more rapid pace. It began when they cleared trees and brush to plant crops, introduced irrigation, and domesticated animals.

The pace gradually increased, and today changes happen with dizzying speed. Humans create something new literally every day: new materials, new medicines, new machines, ... The list seems endless.

On the time scale of evolution, the last 10,000 years are just a blip. As a result, evolution could not keep up and modify the subconscious so that the output of feelings and unbidden thoughts is always appropriate.

Indeed, the subconscious fails to properly function lots of times, resulting in major disasters. For example, due to faulty evolutionary programming, humans conduct wars, gradually destroy land and oceans, deplete natural resources, and eliminate many species of animals. In some sense, humans have become a scourge of the Earth.

Recent decades have added a new dimension to the failures of the subconscious.

Profit Motive

Industry has created products that subtly alter the processes of the subconscious. That manipulation has produced huge profits. But it also has caused, and is still causing, extraordinary harm. For example:

- Social media platforms suggest topics to the user with the goal that the user stays connected as long as possible. This strategy maximizes advertising revenue. It has the insidious side effect that it alters the subconscious. Among the changes, physical violence becomes an acceptable strategy for pursuing one's goals. In Myanmar, wild conspiracy theories on Facebook fueled the genocide of the minority Muslim Rohingya.³ At least 25,000 were killed, tens of thousands raped, and more than 700,000 fled abroad.⁴
- Food and drink designed by the food industry and related advertising have changed subconscious evaluations of when, where, what, and how much one should eat and drink.⁵

In particular, eating has become an addiction that demands food and drink far beyond physical needs. That change is one of the

major causes for the obesity crisis of the US, where 42% of adults were obese in 2022.⁶

- Intensive promotion of opioids for pain treatment by pharmaceutical companies changed subconscious processes. Taking a pill became much more attractive than physical efforts to control pain. The change triggered the opioid crisis in the US. So far more than 100,000 people have died of drug overdoses.⁷

You might say that these disasters, while horrific, are isolated instances that have no connection with your life.

Sorry, that argument is not correct. For example, the strategy of social media that propelled the genocide in Myanmar also has a major negative impact on the subconscious of users in the US, leading to pathological computer use, eating disorders, social anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and even suicide.⁸ As another example, the marketing push by the pharmaceutical industry doesn't just involve opioids, but a vast array of other, often unneeded, medicines.

In fact, as we shall see, the cited instances are just the tip of an iceberg of problems that affect virtually everyone. They have in common that subconscious processes produce wrong feelings and unbidden thoughts that, in turn, prod the conscious mind into wrong decisions and actions.

Remedy

"Oh my," you likely think, "will this book lay out disaster after disaster, and then boldly suggest a global cure that restructures the subconscious of billions of people?"

Don't worry, we won't assemble such a global prescription. In fact, we have no idea how it could be formulated and implemented.⁹

But we *can* pursue the following goal. Each of us can make changes so that our subconscious no longer falls prey to these manipulations. We thus can improve important parts of our life.

How do we obtain the required insight? We use brain science for that purpose. It helps us understand how the subconscious creates feelings and unbidden thoughts. With that information, we can analyze the errors of the subconscious, and—more importantly—how we can restructure the subconscious to avoid them.

Surprised? How can we possibly change the subconscious, given that, by definition, we don't have conscious insight into its inner workings? Well, it can be done, as we see in the chapters to come.

Don't worry, this won't be a boring discussion of theoretical claims and proofs. Instead, we will crisscross a terrain of practical problems. Each step increases insight into the role of feelings and unbidden thoughts produced by the subconscious, and how we can change the subconscious to eliminate erroneous output.

Prior Work

A number of books cover shortcomings of human decision making. In particular, intuitive choices produced by the subconscious have proved to be both right and wrong in numerous settings. Three books investigate intuition-based decision making in great detail:

- *Thinking, Fast and Slow*¹⁰ by D. Kahneman
- *The Invisible Gorilla*¹¹ by C. Chabris and D. Simons
- *Intuition*¹² by D. Myers

Related is the concept of *overthinking*. Numerous texts cover that topic.¹³ The book *Stop Overthinking*¹⁴ by N. Trenton deserves particular mention.

These books consider flawed output by the subconscious while conscious thoughts deal with some decision problem. In this book we look at different situations where erroneous feelings and unbidden thoughts simply pop up and cause havoc.

Several books discuss the horrible results when the subconscious is manipulated for profit. Five key references:

- *The Hungry Gene: The Inside Story of the Obesity Crisis*¹⁵ by E. R. Shell
- *Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*¹⁶ by M. Moss
- *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*¹⁷ by C. Newport
- *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*¹⁸ by M. Fisher
- *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*¹⁹ by A. Lembke

Use of the Book

Two thoughts:

First, we firmly believe that pleasurable results not earned by serious effort invariably turn out to be fleeting and ultimately vacuous. On the other hand, when we work hard to attain something, the reward will last for a while, in some cases even decades. The book is written in that spirit: It calls for commitment and significant actions, and sometimes for hard work. In turn, the book promises major improvements.

Second, the proposals of this book aren't some ideas that just sounded good to us. We have implemented them for ourselves and obtained major improvements in our life.

But— isn't there always a "But"?—there isn't a universal standard for appropriate living, and some suggestions may be at odds with your philosophy of life. The best we can suggest is that you examine each conclusion of the book, think about its usefulness for your life, and then adopt or ignore ideas as you see fit.

Before we analyze the role of the subconscious in our lives, we need to cover some technical aspects of brain science. The next chapter contains that material. By the way, the technical term for

brain science is *neuroscience*. We use it from now to be consistent with the literature.