Hardwired Defensiveness

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Research psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) documented the process that happens when we encounter an idea that conflicts with one we're attached to (religious, political, professional, etc.): our first response is emotional, and only after that response is set does thinking come into play. But the thinking doesn't dispassionately weigh the two ideas in a search for objective truth; rather, it helps us defend our own position by looking for weaknesses in the other's. Haidt presents a large body of experimental evidence that supports this picture, but most of us will recognize the pattern if we look at reruns of political debates or think back to the last time we got into a political argument.

Let's say Fred and John are on different sides of a polarizing political issue, and Fred comes out with a strong statement in support of his side. John's rebuttal is most likely some version of "you're wrong because a, b, and c." Fred's response is then "no, *you're* wrong because d, e, and f." Each is looking for weaknesses in the other's position. Sound familiar?

Exchanges like this almost never change anyone's mind, other than possibly to get them to dig their heels in and fight even harder to defend their position, yet we keep doing it. Why? Einstein is famously held to have said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. So are we all insane?

Given the prevalence of this pattern it's unlikely that everyone who engages in it is insane. In truth, we are fighting a tough uphill battle here. This isn't just a habit we've developed - the dominance of the emotional response is actually hard wired into our brains.

At the base of the brain is a structure called the amygdala (see Fig. 1) which controls the release of adrenalin and other hormones that generate the physical response to threats and emotions - sweating, muscle tension, elevated heart and breathing rates, etc.

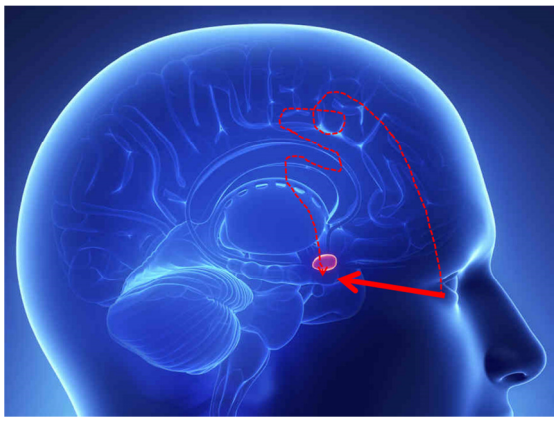

Figure 1 - Amygdala

The amygdala can do some rudimentary reasoning – its job is to decide whether something is a threat or not. But it's not very smart – it can only base the decision on things like instinct, familiarity, and large doses of past experience. And it always errs on the side of caution – if there's doubt it will see a threat.

There are two pathways that carry sensory input to the amygdala - one direct and a second that goes through the cerebral cortex, where we do our thinking. The signals in the direct path arrive first, so the amygdala's initial response is set by unreasoned input. Since the reasoned signals arrive late to the party, they simply join in rather than try to reverse what's already going on (Goleman 2006).

This picture is further validated by the finding that highly intelligent people are better at defending their own ideas, but no better at finding the strengths in opposing ideas (Haidt 2012).

While the cerebral cortex is relatively new in evolutionary terms, the amygdala evolved much earlier. The *threats* have evolved - from "that lion wants me for lunch" to "if that person's idea is accepted I'll lose status" - but the brain wiring that deals with them hasn't. The primitive threat-avoidance wiring hasn't been replaced by reasoning, rather reasoning wiring has been added as a parallel path, and it's slower.

In summary, the emotional response is stronger, it happens faster, and it's motivated by the basic instinct to avoid threats, while the reasoning is slower, weaker, and not closely linked to any basic motivation. Our natural tendency is to unconsciously react to differing ideas as threats and to defend against them by looking for weaknesses. The switch to searching for strengths requires a conscious effort to overcome basic instinct.

The point of this discussion is that it's not so easy to simply start looking for strengths rather than weaknesses. We start out with a natural instinct to be defensive, and even after we recognize that, defensiveness can often creep into our interactions uninvited. Some people never get beyond the threat response, and some seem to be born with natural open-mindedness. Most of us, though, fit somewhere in the middle - we can cultivate a collaborative mindset, but it takes significant conscious effort both to develop it and to maintain it.

References

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012

Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, 2006