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# Parsing the Mind with Homer

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# Parsing the Mind with Homer

Jonathan B. Holmes

Minds are wonderful things. Aside from all the various goodies they offer in our daily psychological functioning, such as thinking, feeling, perceiving, willing and much more, one major function—parsing—has a difficult job description.

## WANTED

A psychological construct to create updated models of reality via the processing of millions of sensory representations in real time, many times per second. Though there will never be any guarantee that the various models of reality will be accurate, the position nonetheless requires the ability to act on these mental constructions to the benefit of a host organism.

The task of putting together a plausible account of how some aspect of the universe works is akin to assembling a jigsaw puzzle where the shape of the pieces may change depending on one's viewpoint. And there is no picture on the box to serve as a guide.

All kinds of scientific enterprise and concentrated inquiry pose these sorts of challenges, but investigations into the nature of the mind bring an additional challenge – the job at hand is not just to parse reality and develop a coherent story, but in effect to “parse the parser” and develop a coherent story of its workings. How does one parse the mind? Do we categorize its functioning as mental or physical? Is it one big homogenous lump or a heterogeneous set of distinct abilities or mental faculties? Do we envision its workings to be like some kind of hydraulic mechanism, a steam engine, or more like some kind of information processor, such as a computer? A large variety of possibilities have been offered over the centuries. Current models of the mind see it functioning like an information processor with numerous distinct modules carrying out individual tasks. Faculties such as thinking, feeling and willing

are usually understood to be separate processes, and though a certain degree of materialism is assumed in many debates about mental architecture, the consensus is far from clear on the ontological status of the mind.

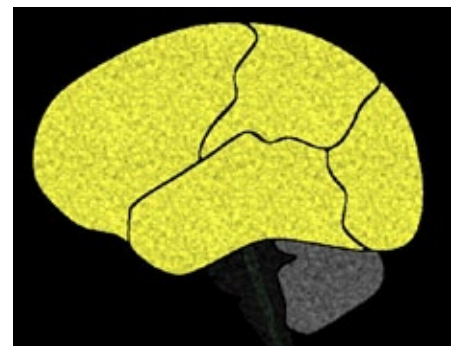
A number of years ago I started looking at how one aspect of minds—consciousness—might operate. By consciousness, I mean subjective experience, the ongoing sense of what it is like to be you. After some time of being excited by the next new book promising to explain consciousness, it became evident that scholars were in a serious muddle about consciousness, including even how to define the term. At this point, rather than slogging through more books on consciousness, I found myself examining the history of psychology. The task was to see if the roots of various current conceptual difficulties could be found by looking at the evolution of thinking about the mind, and if not, to see if something useful for the debate could be found. Interestingly, a number of ideas presented themselves from one of the places where it all began for Western culture, the ancient Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Below I provide a glimpse

of what Homeric minds were like and present some ideas that might be useful for current psychological debate.

## Homeric Psychology 101

In Homer, the most significant terms for psychological functioning are *noos*, *thumos*, and *phrēn* or its plural *phrenes*. A fourth term, *psychē*, does not represent much psychological functioning in Homer (a bit ironic for the root term *psychology*), but the term essentially referred to the non-cognitive shade that survived after death. Entire papers and monographs have been written on each of these terms, but a quick synopsis of the first three will suffice here.

*Noos* is associated with insight or intuition, a clear apprehension of some state of affairs. It is also associated with mental vision, a kind of mental imagery and imagination, with a way of thinking that may be the essential psychological character of a person or group, and with a person's mental essence. At one point in the *Odyssey*, Circe turns Odysseus' crewmates into swine; however, even though they are now rather different creatures than they were, they each retain their *noos*. By this, they remain, in a personal psychological sense, Odysseus' human crewmates.



Mindbrain (original artwork by the author, Fall 2012).

*Phrēn* and its plural *phrenes* are associated with cognition and reasoning, a way of figuring things out if *noos* was not able to immediately grasp a situation. *Phrenes* also serves as a physical place for

cognition, around the lungs, and they serve an important role in language. When people are deliberating on what they will say next, they often place this deliberation in *phrenes* for consideration.

*Thumos* also has cognitive aspects, but it is a more willful and sometimes violent flavor of cognition that is also laced with emotion. It is often the source of forceful, energetic, emotional and willful cognition that leads to action. It is also associated with life itself; as when people are deprived of their *thumos*, they also die. Finally, *thumos* is associated with inner dialogue. Such dialogue often involves some type of internal conflict that must be resolved, such as: should I strive for honor even though the cost might be great? For example, when Odysseus is confronted with an unsettling mass of Trojan war-

Aside from such basic psychological terminology, there are a number of other details to consider in order to get a better sense of these constructs and their workings. First, there is no Homeric term that corresponds to what we mean by “mind.” Mind, of course, has its own range of meanings even today, but the term is used here simply to refer to that concept, place, or domain that encapsulates our psychological structures and processes. The Homeric mental constructs are not encapsulated in a single coherent construct, such as a mind or even a soul, and they are not in the head. Rather, they are scattered in the area around the lungs, heart and diaphragm, areas of the body that could be referred to as the *splanchna*, a term generally meaning “innards” around the chest and upper abdominal area.

idea that they may have literally been conceptualized in some sense as a combination or blending of the mental and the physical. To current sensibilities, this may sound odd, though one must remember that the dualism of a world made of either mental or material things did not yet exist.

Third, as can be seen above, each term has a variety of psychological functions or associations. This situation, however, should be viewed carefully, as separating the term into different semantic categories is a current-day partitioning of its originally more unified semantic field. For example, *noos* may very well have meant, in a fashion that is difficult for current sensibilities to fully appreciate, all of those meanings at once.

Finally, there are many overlappings and functional or categorical blurrings both between and within the constructs. In one aspect, each psychological term may have a more or less predominant set of meanings, but the semantic and functional overlap between the terms can be very high, and in some cases the terms seem almost synonymous. In another, certain psychological processes that are currently viewed as separate were fused, such as emotion and cognition, or even those two plus volition and action. Thus, you did not just *think* about something, rather you *thought-felt-willed* something. Again, this is a rather odd juxtaposition given our current sensibilities. But, perhaps just as oddly, the system seemed to work, at least as far as epic poetry went.

## Two Possible Thinking Points for Current Debates

What does one make of all this? First, it provides a fascinating glimpse into a long-gone world’s ethnopsychology. But, does it inform any current debates about mental architecture and the workings of the mind? A number of possibilities present themselves, and two of these are briefly presented below.



Greek Columns (original artwork by the author, Fall 2012).

riors bearing down on him, his *thumos* debates the merits between retreat, which would carry the associated assumption of cowardice, or staying to fight the Trojans despite his tactical disadvantages. He then goes on to deliberate this decision in *phrenes* and *thumos* as the Trojan masses approach.

Thus, there were many “minds” rumbling around in the torso.

Second, the ontological status of these many minds is unclear at best, and maybe even incommensurable with current sensibilities. Some researchers have variously referred to these things as *mental organs*, an odd juxtaposition to be sure, but one that reflects the

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For one, there is no mind-body problem in Homer. The mind-body problem is a distinct hang-up for explaining consciousness; how could it be that the physical brain could possibly create what seems to be a loftier kind of thing, namely subjective experience and men-

tightly encapsulated in its own small domain. The computational theory of mind, a leading paradigm in mental functioning, is particularly known for the use of some degree of modular mental functioning based upon the flow of information through various

faculties or mental modules is a bit too sloppy. For example, there is no *a priori* reason that thinking and feeling must actually be different things, or at least completely unblended in some way. As well, there is also no *a priori* reason why certain functions of the mind must not overlap with other functions, producing a bit of mental redundancy and blending, and thereby, perhaps a more flavorful mental experience.

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## Minds need to be excellent parsers, categorizers, and story tellers in order to get us by in whatever reality we find ourselves.

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tal states? Figuring out exactly how a non-physical thing could interact with a physical thing, and vice versa, has been attempted throughout history by various thinkers, including Descartes (who failed), but it is also not just something of the past. Some researchers have recently proposed that quantum interactions at special points in neurons somehow give birth to mental states from the physical brain. Perhaps the mind-body problem is based on assumptions that need some reworking, and the idea that something can be both physical and non-physical, perhaps *pseudo-physical*, provides an interesting thinking point for such debate.

For another, the idea that a certain mental construct may have a number of different functions, overlap some functions with other mental constructs, and also combine seemingly disparate processes such as thinking, feeling, and willing into an odd-sounding combination or *gestalt* is very interesting. The importance here lies in our current parsings of the mind into distinct faculties, and in some research even into orthogonal, non-overlapping mental modules, each with a specific task, each

modules and processors. Depending upon how much of the mind is thought to be modular, this is a very tidy arrangement, but nature is under no requirement to be tidy. Stephen Pinker published a book titled *How the Mind Works* (1997) that presents a computational model of the mind that employs a large degree of mental modularity, even for higher-level psychological functions. The philosopher of mind Jerry Fodor was one of the earlier proponents of the modular mind, though mostly for lower-level computational processes. In response to Pinker's book, Fodor wrote *The Mind Doesn't Work That Way* (2000), in which he explained why the computational model of the mind with such massive modularity is insufficient. He even gets a bit gloomy at times, such as when he states that "...what our cognitive science has found out about the mind is mostly that we don't know how it works." (p.100).

All this makes one wonder whether or not the ability of our own minds to parse the universe and analyze problems into their little bits may need some reining in. That is, what is logically separable may not be separable in fact. Thinking about distinct mental

### In Conclusion

Aside from presenting a fascinating window into the mental workings of Homeric figures, the lack of a mind-body problem as well as the functional "sloppiness" of Homer's mental organs present some interesting thinking points for current psychology. While these insights may not be a panacea that will miraculously resolve serious issues in current psychology, they do open up some interesting possibilities to think outside the current box, as it were, by looking into a much more ancient box to inform our current debate.

Additionally, an interesting methodological issue arises when pondering such things. It makes one wonder a bit about the mind's ability to decipher itself. Minds need to be excellent parsers, categorizers, and story tellers in order to get us by in whatever reality we find ourselves. However, is it possible that the mind might be a bit parse-happy in parsing itself? It is always a bit of a trick to try to measure something with itself.

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