

The Brain's Autopilot Mechanism Steers Consciousness

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Numerous studies have demonstrated that subliminal stimulation involving concepts such as aging or death have measurable consequences on behavior. Test subjects move more slowly, for example, or become more responsive to spiritual ideas. The phenomenon is familiar in everyday life. Passing a bakery, people may suddenly remember that they forgot to get the ingredients for a birthday cake. Our unconscious paves the way for our actions.

Such examples confirm that the brain functions along multiple tracks. Compared with a computer, our gray matter chugs along very slowly—but on many parallel levels. Researchers often distinguish between two general strands, however. Nobel laureate in economics Daniel Kahneman calls them System 1 and System 2. Others speak of implicit and explicit or hot versus cold processing. The first strand (System 1, implicit, hot) refers to the rapid, automatic and uncontrollable workings of the unconscious mind; the other strand (System 2, explicit, cold) describes the slow, more flexible conscious processes that are subject to volition. But what is key in the predictive mind conception of mental functioning is that these two strands always work in tandem; in other words, our mind operates both unconsciously and consciously.