

How Does Intuition Work?

By Derek Beres

(Adapted from *Big Think*)

Humans love a good battle. Red versus blue. Religion versus spirituality. Yankees versus Red Sox. Being a champion implies someone need to finish second. Every god needs his archenemy.

One popular battle in psychology pits the logical domain of rationality [reason] against the mystical intuition. This is facilitated by comments such as ‘You’re thinking too much, you just have to *feel*.’ Or, from the other side, ‘Use some common sense!’

Yet as we learn more about neurochemistry the mysterious becomes understandable. Psychiatrist Peter C Whybrow recognizes that intuition is a primary component in tuning your brain. He translates intuition as a reflexive self-knowledge governed by a preconscious neural network. This network is informed by previously learned patterns, which help determine moral rules, acquired habits, and beliefs. As with riding a bicycle, repetition leads to mastery—no longer restricted by uncertainty, we free up cognitive space to focus on other things. When a recognizable pattern later emerges, intuition seems to arise spontaneously. This, of course, does not guarantee our intuition is right. We tend to point out when it happens to be on point while ignoring events in which our intuition was wrong. This is an important oversight for our emotions; we don’t like our ‘inner sense’ being off.

Accepting that intuition is unconscious pattern recognition does not sit well with those who would rather assign the phenomenon to mysticism or magic, which is odd, given how often we enjoy the fruits of other forms of such habits. As Whybrow writes,

We find no discomfort in accepting that many motor skills and certain mental abilities—catching a ball, skiing, riding a bicycle, learning to read and write—become automatic with practice.

This inability to group intuition with such motor skills sets the stage for the imagined battle between rationality and intuition. Psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman thinks a [middle way](#) between those states of mind helps you live a grounded life filled with creative musings.

Intuitive insight can be trusted ... only when operating under experiential circumstances that are regular, predictable, and stable at the time that the reflexive insight occurs. In the absence of such stable contingencies, he says, intuition is unreliable.

<http://bigthink.com/21st-century-spirituality/how-does-intuition-work>

1. How does the author define *Intuition* in your own words?

2. What are some of the limitations of *intuition*?

3. What is an example of the use of *intuition*?

4. What does the author think is the relationship between *intuition* and *reason*?