



It Comes From Space

“The amazing face of the motherly seal has more honesty than the unreliable features of a two-faced politician.” — **Munia Khan, poet**

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The notion of distance as it applies to a network theory of our thought processes.

Distance

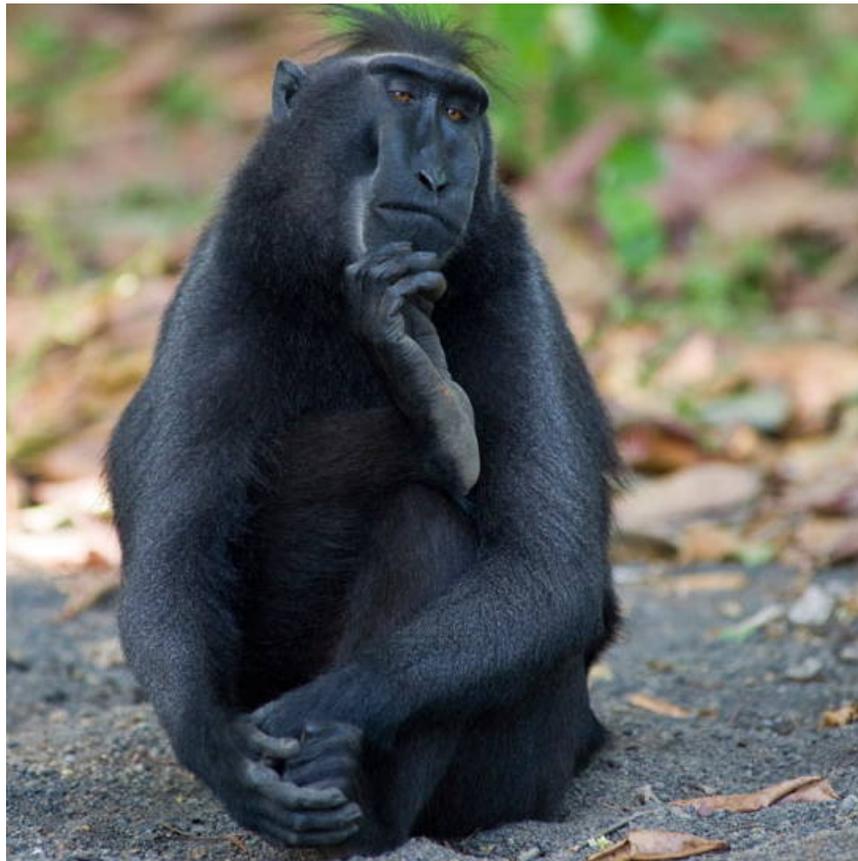
Of the many things we take for granted, space may be what we take for granted the most. Not only do we take it for granted, but we don't examine how much we apply it to things to which it doesn't apply. We project our notion of distance onto things that don't have distance, and we don't think about it.

For example, we recognize emotional distance, which has nothing to do with space or measure. We categorize people by their proximity to space and movement when it's their attitude, not their location or mobility, that we're referring to: jet setters, homebodies, good neighbors, urbanites, car campers, and road warriors.

We describe space by quoting distance, but we experience space subjectively, not as distance. We're constantly distorting our subjective experience of space but overlooking these experiences. When we unconsciously drive to our destination, we consider the short time elapsed to be unreal. When we endure an unexpected day of walking, it dominates the recollection of our day, even though it took up no mental space. When we dream of spaces that make no sense, we write it off as an illusion.

We understand space as something uniform in all directions, and distance as a measure that does not change when pointed in another direction. We take these objective notions of navigation—which are not what we experience—and carelessly apply them to all manner of experience. We understand distance and depth instinctually.

These preconceptions are wired into our brains. They're built into our body and have nothing to do with our abstract notion of space. We use our instincts of distance, speed, and momentum in learning to move and balance, and then we apply them to everything.



I want to talk about space for two reasons. First, because there's more to it. And second, because our preconception causes us to ignore what we should see.

Thinking About Space

We don't navigate physical space, we navigate mental space. When we think about motion, we apply a subjective meaning of distance. Physical space is something we abstract but largely ignore. In fact, we don't see physical space—we construct a projection of it. The distances and depths that we perceive are things we create in our minds based on the movements of light and shadow.

We guide ourselves using paths, not distances. We measure paths in terms of risk, reward, time, and cost. We might use the measured distance as a shorthand to express the separation between us and our friends, but distance plays no role in our decisions about visiting them. In some sense, distance doesn't even exist, because we're always in the same place: wherever we go, we always find ourselves "here."

The simple and fundamental understanding of space is that it's the same in all directions. We apply this notion to many other "territories" that should not be described in terms of space at all, such as growth, maturity, aptitude, and emotion.

We are full of measures like IQ, sociability, wealth, and happiness. We apply these measures to ourselves and to everyone else. Wherever we describe something as being more or less we create a map of equal spacing and place ourselves on it. You have placed yourself on such a map now; you are judging yourself according to your distance to your goal. But this is nonsense: there is no such "distance."

You may be described as more happy than I, but who is to say that our notions of happiness can be compared? You may think you have a long way to go to make your life meaningful. You may think you are close to achieving your goals. These distances are deceptions.

What's measured by an I.Q. test is not intelligence. The many things that stand between you and happiness are not "there." Just because you have one hundred childhood traumas does not mean you have one hundred issues to resolve. Just because something can be measured, named, or enumerated doesn't make it real.



Space as a Network

We don't really think of our movement through space in terms of distance. We don't map our thoughts on a graph. Our thoughts form a network—like our movements. It is an organic network that grows and shrinks with our mood and to which new links are frequently added, but we don't bother to map it. We should.

In this thought network there are dominant things that most occupy our thoughts. These are our thought network's main nodes. Connected to these nodes are less common thoughts. There are paths between thoughts, and these connections can be rich or impoverished. In many cases, these paths are strange and we leave them unexplored. The network of our thoughts is filled with passages—doors we've passed a hundred times but prefer not to see. Some we've taken a hundred times, but we forget or pretend we do.

Most intermediate thoughts lead in several directions: different directions, depending on how you approach them. Approaching thoughts of your parents from the perspective of money, mortality, or your childhood will take you to different conclusions.

Compared to the network of your thoughts, the network of your paths in space is far simpler. Your spatial network is a series of maps, each for a different mode of travel. There will be one map for walking, another for driving, flying, and puttering around the kitchen. Your thoughts are not so simple.

The network of your thoughts is made complicated both because of the connections you ignore and the way your thoughts combine. You don't combine paths on a travel network—you either take one or the

other; but when you build thoughts, you often pursue several lines at once. You set up resonances where thoughts bounce back and forth between paths, and what you do will depend on when you act more than what you think.

It's hard to imagine your thought network, but you can build it area by area. A whole map might be possible, but you'd never need it. These maps are not stable. They change over time, and they change just as a result of looking at them. You can always rebuild a thought network when you need it.

Imagine that you understood yourself as the network of thoughts. Different nodes of your map might represent different thoughts or points of view. They might represent different people. You might map your personalities as if they were other people—other people who you might be rather than the person you are.

Imagine you could see the map for other people you know, even if you could see only a small portion of it. More usefully, what if you could choose to look at particular parts of this map for certain people? Isn't this what you're essentially doing when you try to understand someone?



Using the Network

In a previous post titled “[How the World Changes](#),” I mentioned there being a “force of mind” that determined what thoughts emerged in our consciousness. This idea related thought elements that work together to activate our thoughts. These form a network of salient links connecting familiar territories.

Force of mind is a measure of distance. It measures what gets you from one idea to another. You reach related thoughts by understanding their strengths, what supports them, and where they lead. Every thought has a context in terms of what it accomplishes and where it comes from.

When you are depressed, you inhabit an unhappy network with few paths out of a dismal valley. Within this network, you will notice inner conflicts, odd connections, and strange conclusions. You don't need the whole map, as mapping your critical nodes will be sufficient. Your map's instability is not a failure but rather the whole purpose of the exercise: your seeing how you're thinking in real time, rather than rationalizing how you should be thinking.

If you're fearful, trace your thoughts as they turn from possibility to panic. This is partly rational, but it is also the actual path of experience. Understanding the progression could stop the runaway train of fears.

I had a client who was facing a trip to Southeast Asia and who was afraid of air travel. We followed the thoughts and discovered it wasn't the conclusions that were the problem but the powerlessness of the situation. It was not airplanes of which my client was fundamentally afraid—although that thought instilled panic—it was powerlessness and captivity.

Your thought networks show the details of your thought patterns. This is far more useful than a label. Labels don't give any sense of direction between states of mind or difference between people, and they don't provide insight into how to change things. My client's label was "fear of flying," a kind of paranoia, but that said nothing of the origin of the situation.

We take space for granted and, because of this, we employ simple notions of how we think. There is no "space" in mind-space. There are no linear distances or dimensions in your thoughts. These measures don't exist.

Mind-space is something that emerges dynamically from the way thoughts build themselves. Without a theory of our mental network, psychology is sterile. With such a theory, who knows how far you can go.

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