

The Eyes Have It

The Crucial Importance of Looking at Another's Face and Eyes

By

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A few months ago, I started wondering about mirrors for some random reason and realized that throughout most of human history most people could never have seen themselves or known what they looked like. This is so, I concluded, because the only reflective surface widely available would have been water, which would have provided a distorted, if not grotesque image. I then imagined what my life would be like if I didn't know what I look like. Even if, on some rare occasions I did get a distorted glimpse of myself, perhaps in a pool of still water, my face would likely feel more like that of a stranger than as something belonging to me.

Yet, as a modern person, like all of us, I am able to see my face clearly and frequently with an abundance of perfectly reflective mirrors, along with photographs and videos. I know what I look like and don't have to wonder what others see when they look at me. Realizing this, I then wondered if the deficit of reflective surfaces throughout most of human history helps explain the rise of inequality in even the earliest of human civilizations. Before the widespread use of mirrors individuals would have had limited opportunities to engage in self-reflection or to accurately construct a self-image independent of the views imposed by their community and societal norms. They were defined more by how others saw them than how they saw themselves.

Modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, have been around between 200,000 and 300,000 years. There was almost certainly some inequality in the small bands and tribes our ancestors originally lived in, whether enforced or part of a natural and necessary division of labor. But it wasn't until the rise of larger human civilizations that real inequality emerged. Mesopotamia, considered the oldest, dating back to 3,100 BCE, was based on a loose social hierarchy that quickly evolved into a stratified social structure with few on top and almost everyone else on the bottom. Around this same time, ancient Egypt had a pharaoh at the top, followed by a class of priests and nobles, the military, and the majority existing as workers and slaves at the bottom. Ancient China has a similar structure, with a King or Emperor at the top, followed by a small group of nobles, and everyone else—artisans, farmers, and slaves—at the bottom. It was the same in India, which today is still largely defined by its ancient caste system, and we all know of the European feudal system dating back to the Middle Ages, in which there was a King and a few Nobles at the top, and the serfs or peasants at the very bottom tier of society who accounted for most the population.

Could it be, the majority of people in these societies settled for so much less in their lives because they could not see themselves as anything more than how they had been caste by

others? Mirrors, be they physical or metaphorical, give us a self-image. The truer the reflection, the more acute an individual's self-awareness might lead to the questioning of one's societal role. Without real mirrors and an accurate understanding of oneself, perhaps in contrast to how one is falsely portrayed by others, one's sense of identity is more easily defined by one's assigned social roles.

Conversely, could the ubiquitous presence of mirrors in modern life explain human society's increasing demand for equality, a value that was unthinkable to our ancestors who took the notions of caste and class as a natural birthright? Although the ideal of equality evolved slowly over time, it wasn't until the 17th and 18th centuries, during the Enlightenment, that it was recognized as a fundamental value, leading to notions such as "The Rights of Man" outlined by Thomas Paine, to the French Declaration that all "men are born and remain free and equal in rights," and so eloquently stated in the U.S., Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal."

Although some version of mirrors date back thousands of years, such as polished stone or bronze, and glass mirrors dating back to first century Rome, it wasn't until 1835 that a German chemist developed the process of applying a thin layer of metallic silver to one side of a clear glass pane, inventing the modern mirror. This innovation obviously improved the reflectivity and clarity of mirrors and led to their widespread production and use, transforming mirrors from luxury items into affordable, everyday objects.

The invention and democratization of mirrors came on the heels of the Enlightenment, but not before human equality had already become a widespread ideal. Modern mirrors, that is, did not lead to the Enlightenment and its values, but, like so many other inventions, were the result of it having unleashed human innovation. But what if there is another kind of mirror that has always been accessible to every person who has ever lived? I'm talking a certain group of brain cells neuroscientist have aptly named "mirror neurons." Although they were only discovered in the 1990s, they have been part of human neurology, as well as other creatures', for as long as we have been around.¹ Mirror neurons fire when an individual acts as well as when one observes others in action. This enables us to understand what others are doing and feeling, and to empathize with them. They enable us to see the world through the eyes and experiences of others, which, without physical mirrors, may have once been the only way to see ourselves, by connecting with what others see when they look at and interact with us.

Again, lots of creatures have mirror neurons, allowing them to relate to what others are experiencing and doing, including other primates, mammals, birds, fish, and even insects. This means that not all behavior in other creatures is instinctive. Mirror neurons allow many creatures to take advantage of observational learning. But humans, being as sophisticated as we are, can learn not only through imitation but by understanding the actions and intentions of others, and to experience deep feelings of empathy for what others are going through. In

this way, others become our mirrors, we recognize ourselves in them, and them in us. When this is the case, when we see ourselves in the eyes and faces of others, recognizing our common humanity, equality must become a value. As the Buddhist saying goes, “Every murder is a suicide.” Or, as Dr. King put it, “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.”

Not only do mirror neurons give us the ability to see ourselves in the faces and behaviors of others—to understand their joys and sorrows, to grieve and celebrate with them—they are also among the very first brain structures activated after we are born. Newborns can imitate facial expressions within the first few hours and days of life, and by six months they can display clear imitative abilities, mimicking simple actions seen performed by adults. In other words, they don’t learn merely by relying on their own individual discoveries but, from day one, have the ability to mimic, that is, “mirror,” the actions of others.² Hopefully we’ve all experienced the joy of having a baby return a smile with a smile, or playing, where’s your nose, where’s your eyes, where’s your mouth, and so forth, by merely pointing to our own. As psychologist Peter J. Marshall and brain scientist Andrew N. Meltzoff write in their 2014 article, *Neural Mirroring Mechanisms and Imitation in Human Infants*, “Human infants are more prolific imitators than the young of any other species.”³

It should be remembered that just because they are called mirror neurons doesn’t mean they are activated purely through eyesight. The mirror neurons of children born blind are equally as active as they come to “see” the world in their own ways, perhaps with heightened uses of sound and touch and other senses. For example, a study published in *PLOS ONE* found that, when blindfolded, sighted individuals and blind individuals performed hand actions while hearing sounds associated with these actions, similar brain areas (including those related to mirror neuron systems) were activated just as they were when sighted individuals watched these same actions being performed. This indicates that the mirror neuron system can adapt to process auditory and other cues as they do with visual cues.⁴

This not only suggests the ability to mirror is available to all human beings, but that it is so necessary to our existence that the brain readily attempts to adapt to any circumstances that may work to diminish this ability. It also suggests that we evolved never see ourselves except as reflected in the eyes, expression, and actions of others, who in turn recognize themselves only by looking at us. We show each other who we are. Except for the past less than 200 years, most people lived and died without ever having seen their own image. Humans, further, are among less than a handful of species that can recognize their own images. Great apes, some species of dolphins, elephants, Eurasian magpies, and some species of ants, have all been shown to recognize themselves in mirrors. Since, however, these species don’t normally use mirrors, it’s safe to say that, except for humans during the past two centuries, all creatures on Earth have lived and continue to live without ever having seen themselves. This is the nature of life.

But if this is so, if we've been able to mirror each other since our beginning, even if we could only see everyone but ourselves, why has inequality and injustices been so much a part of the human condition throughout most of its existence? If, that is, the solution to inequality and injustice is recognizing ourselves in the faces of others, and mirroring behavior is such an intricate part of life, why have the vast majority of people been treated as less than far fewer people at the top of the social pyramid? The answer, I'm guessing, is because those on both its top and bottom have found ways to prevent their mirror neurons from being the dominant force when it comes to self-image.

If the top one to two percent of people, the ruling elite and upper class, are to justify having far more power and resources than almost everyone else, they must, in order to justify such uneven circumstances, bypass the neurological processes that recognize our common humanity, ourselves in the faces of others; others who, like us, deserve to be equal, free, and happy. Nobody wants to blame themselves, so they blame such circumstances on those who are exploited. It is an accident of birth, a congenital condition, due to class or caste. Or a you-get-what-you-deserve attitude. Or they may justify them with religion, by citing Jesus, for example, "The poor shall always be with," or promoting the idea that wealth and prosperity is a sign of God's, not the system's, favoritism.

At the same time, those at the bottom also learn to shut off their mirror neurons when it comes to those at the top. Since they cannot see what they really look like, they settle for the self-image that has been handed them and reaffirmed by all of society, those at the top and bottom. I once met a Syrian woman, for example, who had defied the odds by going to law school to become an attorney, something entirely unusual for females in her culture. She told me her worst critics weren't men already in the field, but other women in her community who regularly shamed and scolded her for not knowing her proper place.

In many societies, it has long been considered improper for a person of inferior rank to look their superiors in the eye. Speaking of Jesus, one of his parables is about a rich man who exploits his day laborers and seems to delight in rubbing their noses in it by paying those who work the longest and hardest only as much as he pays those who work the least. When some of them complain, the rich man says, "Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"⁵ Jesus's subversive parables would have stood out to his original audience for putting those most exploited in direct contact with the ruling elite, something that would not have happened in real life. That the rich man complained about them looking him in the eyes—giving him the evil eye, if you will—something that would have taken an act of courage and the recognition that the workers were his equal. That's what Jesus was usually trying to convey, that we are all equals, no matter what anyone else says, the poor, the unclean, the demonized, foreigners, women, children, and so on. Only instead of saying we are all born with inalienable rights and have inherent worth and dignity, as we do today, he simply said we are all children of God.

To this day, there are many societies in which it is considered rude to look others in the eyes. In Japan, for example, direct eye contact is sometimes considered rude or aggressive, especially when interacting with superiors or elders. In professional or formal settings, avoiding eye contact can be seen as a gesture of politeness or deference. Likewise, in China prolonged direct eye contact, especially with someone of a higher social status or older age, might be perceived as impolite or confrontational. It's the same in Korean culture, and some Native American cultures, and various African cultures.

In western society, which has been more greatly influenced by the Enlightenment's emphasis on equality and individual dignity, the opposite is usually true. It's considered rude not to look someone in the eye when engaging. Those who do not are thought of as rude or untrustworthy, as if they have something to hide. We do tend to avoid eye contact when we have wronged someone or otherwise feel ashamed and unworthy. The root of the word shame is "sham." We hide our faces in shame just as some cover them with shams, which prevents our mirror neurons from engaging. They don't engage, that is, when we can't see each other. So, throughout time, those who have exploited the masses, have instilled in them the habit of averting their eyes, looking down. They may do so because they have truly come to believe they are lesser people, but the habit was instilled by their oppressors who prefer not to see the humanity in the eyes of those they exploit.

All of this has been to point out that we have evolved to look at each other, to look deeply at each other, in order to recognize our common humanity, that we are human, and they are human, and all humans are equal and deserve equal rights and to be treated with dignity and live a dignified life. But today, including in western culture, we have come to avert our gaze for another reason, the advent of social media and the smartphone. I'll tell only one story to make the point.

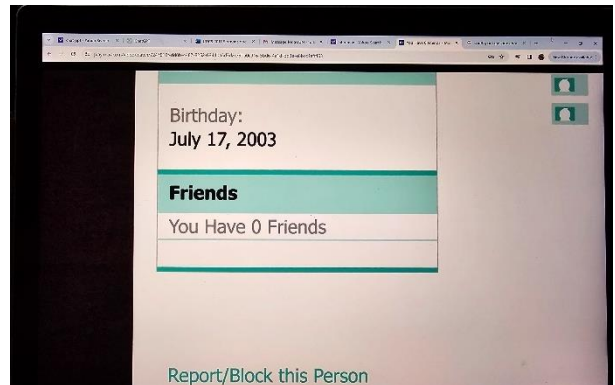
A couple years ago, I was taking my dog Chester for an early morning walk as we passed a group of four high school students awaiting the school bus. They were each in a corner all their own, all but one looking downward at their smartphones, entirely disengaged from one another. The girl without a phone, who looked to be of Indian descent, who, for cultural reasons, may not have been allowed a phone, seemed the most alone and isolated of them all. Here she stood, with a group of peers, none of whom were speaking to her or noticing her. What were her mirror neurons telling her she looked like to them—the invisible girl? The uninteresting girl? The unimportant girl? As Chester and I passed, she caught his eyes and smiled for the first time, then looked at me, and I smiled back. This memory still makes me sad.

Everyone knows I love technology and put a lot of faith in it when it comes to bettering our future. And I can't wait until social media advances to the point that we are not looking at texts and devices anymore, but at our faces again, or, at least, at a representation of our faces

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in virtual spaces. Even if we have less real face-to-face contact in the future, we need to socialize more on applications like Zoom, or with faces of avatars, no matter how simplistic they might look. In 2015, the night I bought my first VR headset, I entered a virtual park wherein several others were engaging with each other in various conversations. The avatars at the time were entirely primitive. They looked like very simply cartoon characters with no facial animation at all. Yet I soon began speaking to a fellow who was also there for the first time. It turned out that he was a Unitarian from Nashville, Tennessee. We looked at each other's virtual faces as we spoke, for what ended up being a couple few hours. After it was over, I was amazed at how much it felt like an ordinary human connection, unlike what I experience while texting on my phone.

I want to show you what I mean by briefly looking at some very simply images from one of my favorite shows, *South Park*. Each sequence tells a story. I want you to help explain what you think these stories are about.

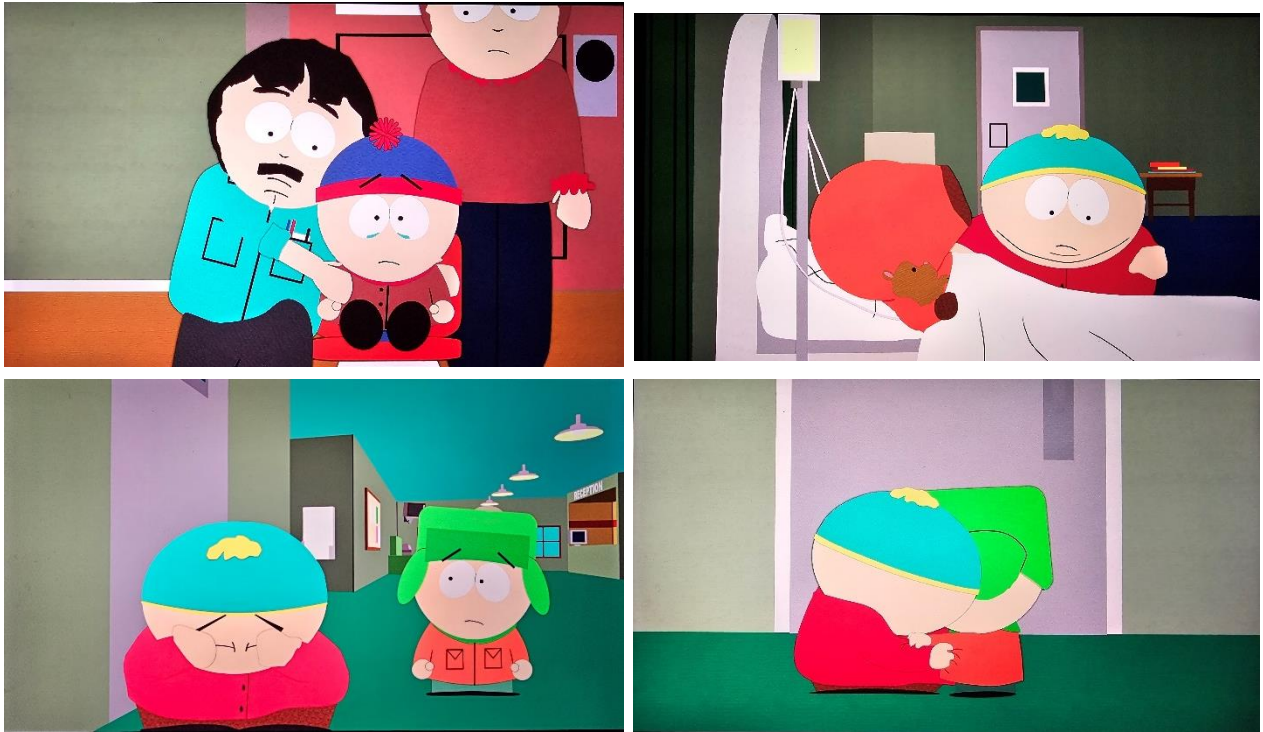


The first sequence is from an episode about Facebook. The boy in these images is sad because he has no Facebook friends. Later, he's happy because he finally has a friend.

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The images in this set are about Wendy who becomes troubled when her friend Bibi gets a positive text, unlike the texts she gets. So, she's angry at her boyfriend Stan for not sending her better texts. Stan doesn't understand what he's done wrong.



This final set shows us Stan getting some bad news. His friend Kenny is dying. This also upsets Cartman and Kyle, so they comfort each other.

The point of these stories is to show that we are able to understand what's going on with each other even when looking at the most primitive drawings of others, something we cannot do when looking at texts on our smartphones. These *South Park* stories and the stories about my first virtual reality visit, and of the girl Chester and I encountered during our walk, show us that millenniums of evolution have fashioned us to look at each other, not to look down in shame or at our devices, but into each other's eyes and faces, where we see ourselves, our common humanity, and that we are all equals and born with inherent worth and dignity.

¹ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4006193/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ PLOS ONE, "**Spatial Language Processing in the Blind: Evidence for a Supramodal Representation and Cortical Reorganization,**" by Marijn E. Struiksma , Matthijs L. Noordzij, Sebastiaan F. W. Neggers, Wendy M. Bosker, Albert Postma, Published: September 14, 2011.

⁵ Mathew 20:13-15