

Why do people demonise others in war?

A social psychological/neuroscientific analysis

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Background assumptions

- Atrocities are influenced by environmental (including social/cultural) factors such as war
- They are also influenced by the people involved
- To understand why atrocities happen, we need to understand how environmental factors interact with people
- The site of these interactions is the human brain

Two observations

- Slippery slope
- Detachment from reality and 'normal' morality

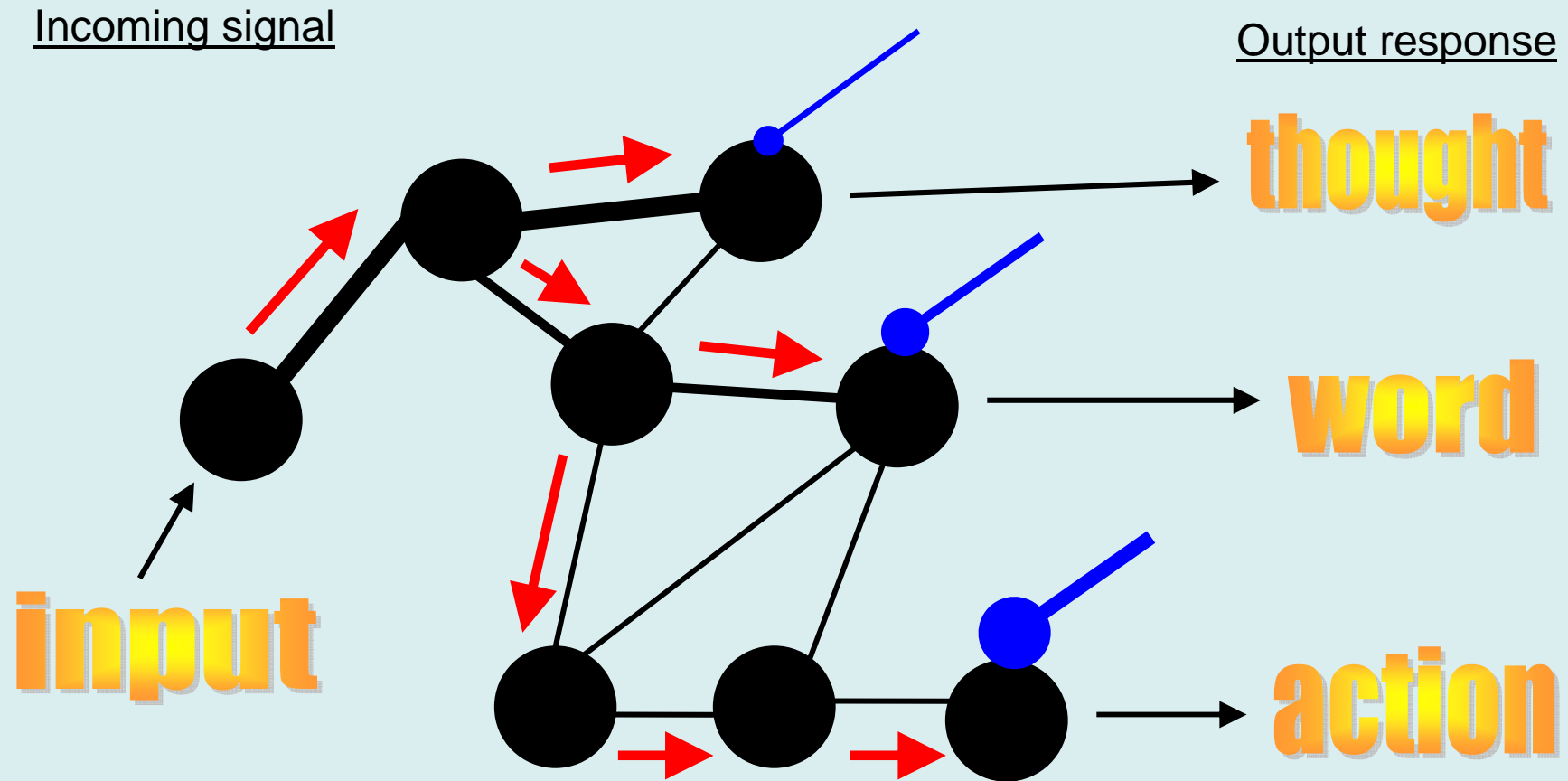
Brains (1): key concepts

- Neurons
- Synapses: **positive** and **inhibitory**
- Firing
- Simultaneity and association
- 'Priors'
- Synapse strength and change:

stronger synapses are harder to change

Slippery slope

Slippery slope



Brains (2): reality checking

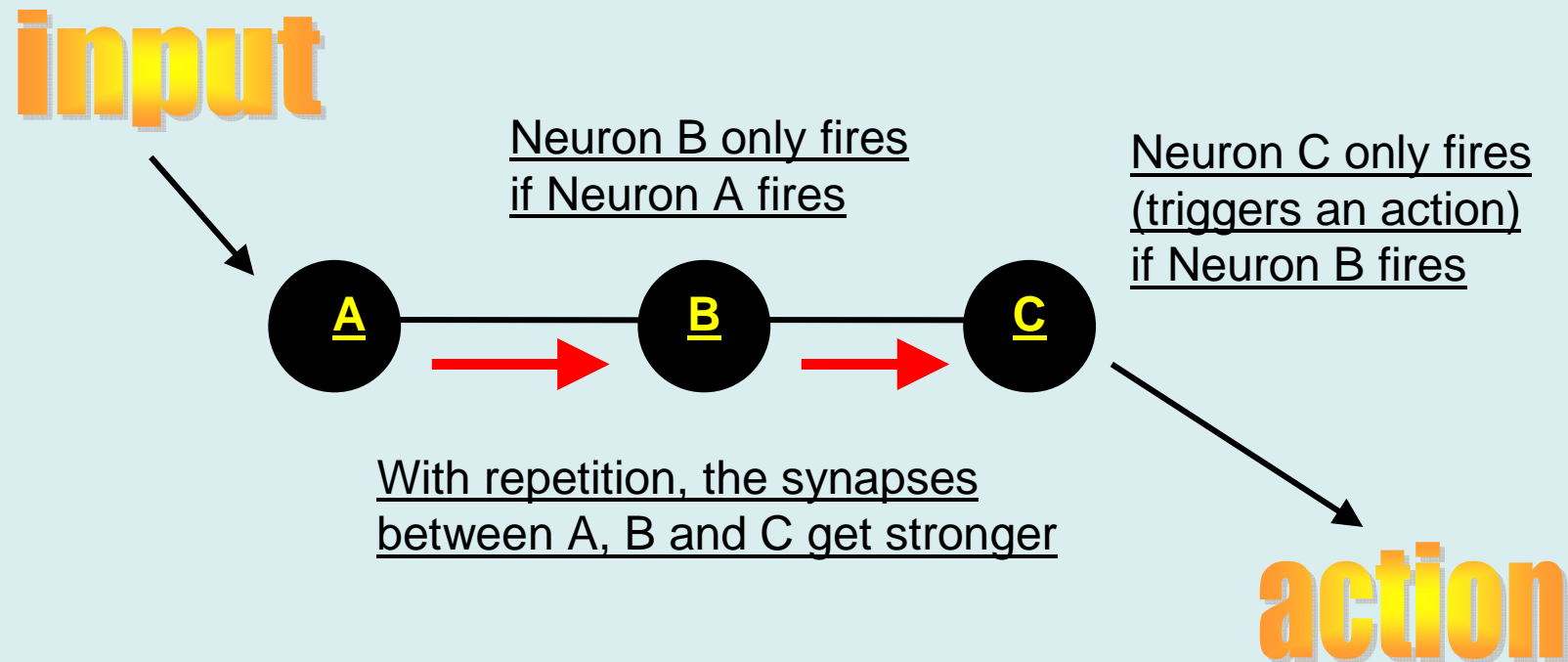
- Thalamus neurons represent incoming information
- Cortical neurons represent expectations
- The brain compares them
- Mismatch – 'dissonance' – leads to adjustment
- Whichever is stronger – usually the incoming information – changes less

Sometimes, however, established priors get so strong that even when new information – or other priors - conflict with them they no longer change much

Ideas of this type are impervious to reason

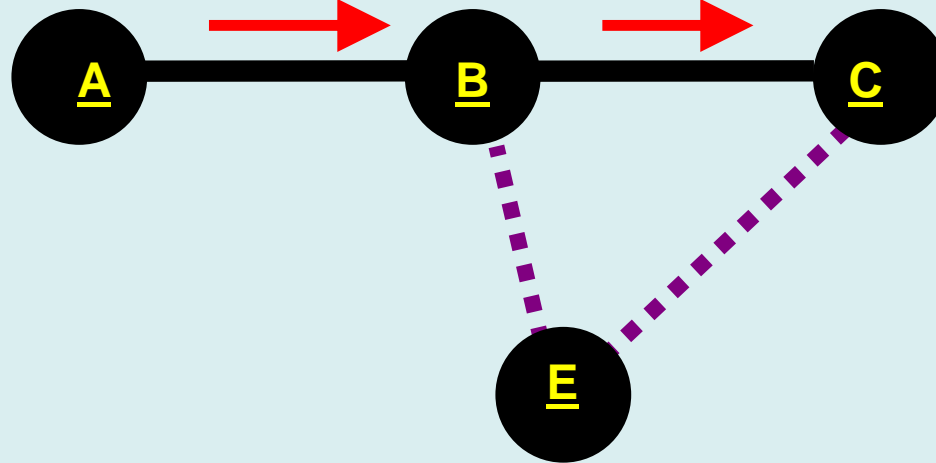
Detachment

Detachment (1): typical priors



Detachment (2): strong priors

input



A signal from A is thus no longer needed to make B and C fire, leading to an action

Emotion signals from E activate Neurons B and C

action

Social reality

- Brains change to reduce conflict
- Conflict is interpreted as error, and distrusted
- Consistent, reliable signals come to be trusted
- Social signals: the same rule tends to apply (especially under stress)
- Brains get many priors from people around them whom they have learned to trust and predict
- Information from strangers is interpreted as less reliable

Implications: atrocities are likely ...

- when large-scale social changes challenge many priors simultaneously (e.g. war, revolution, economic collapse, some cults)
- when strong emotions are chronically invoked (e.g. war, prelude to war)
- when ideological messages are clear, consistent and accepted by the perpetrators' ingroup as well as the perpetrators themselves
- when stereotyping and minor abuse is not actively challenged/punished
- when bystanders' reactions are supportive, neutral or inconsistent - with each other or their own past behaviour (e.g. genocide [Power])
- when the perpetrator group is isolated (e.g. the military, terrorists, cults)
- when inhibitory priors are less well established (e.g. in young men)
- when preceded by other, less extreme, hostile behaviour or previous atrocities. The more gradual the lead-in, the less perpetrator trauma and sense of unreality afterwards

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Further information

- All material is copyright Kathleen Taylor 2009
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- This presentation was given to the 'Barbarisation in Warfare' conference at Wolverhampton University in June 2005