

WEEK 4 ANSWER TO QUESTION 3

STEP 4.7 ASK MARK

OK. Question three is not one participant's question. It's a sort of an amalgamation of a number of participants' comments. And so our mentors have paraphrased those comments into this amalgamated question. Here it comes.

Given the instincts and how they guide us from the deep, what explains suicidal tendencies or self-destructive behaviour? Similarly, how would Freud's death drive fit into this? Is there anything in the brain that would motivate irrational behaviour, something beyond the pleasure principle? What is the effect of inhibiting our basic instincts?

As I hope you've noticed, that's not one question. That's many questions. And what's worse, there are many big questions there. So I'm not going to be able to address that properly without really giving another course. But I'll try to get to the heart of the matter.

The essence here is about irrational behaviour exemplified by suicide, which would seem to be the most irrational of behaviours if the guiding principle of the mind, as I'm claiming, if the guiding principle is that the mind serves the purposes-- the basic biological purposes of survival to reproduce. What could be more irrational in a world governed by the rule, thou shalt survive and reproduce, than to kill himself.

Well, let me come at that question in a roundabout way. And I'm going to pick up again on this theme of there being a distinction between the affects-- the motivational forces of the mind-- and the representations, which relate to the external world in which the needs of the body can be met via our motivational interaction with the world and its representations. Those motivational mechanisms-- the basic instincts referred to in this question-- they are rational in themselves in the sense that they are designed, or that they have been selected in, through natural selection by dint of the contribution that they make to our survival and reproductive success.

But those instincts then have to attach to an external world, which is highly unpredictable and variable. And through learning, you attach the motivational force to a particular type of object. And there things can go awry, and do.

And I'll use a famous example. Konrad Lorenz. Konrad Lorenz, who was in one of the sort of discoverers, if you will, of the attachment bond, what was then called imprinting

behaviour. He did a famous experiment with geese in which he took a batch of eggs from which goslings were hatched. Half of them were hatched in the normal way by the mother, the mother goose. And as the little goslings came out of the eggs, so they looked up and saw, here's Mummy. And they all started to follow her as goslings do with their-- you've seen little strings of goslings all running off the Mummy goose. That's what they do.

But the other half of the eggs were hatched in an incubator. And the first living creature that they found tending to them when they came out of the eggs was Konrad Lorenz himself. So what did they do? They all imprinted Konrad Lorenz, and followed him around.

And this then stayed the same for life. So you could mix all of these goslings up into a crowd. And then you put mother goose here. And you put Konrad Lorenz there. And they would separate out according to which of those two conditions they were hatched in.

And this lot would always follow Konrad Lorenz. Now if you are a little baby goose, and you're needing to attach to your mum, it's a very bad idea to attach to some funny biologist. This mechanism is not designed to attach to biologists. It's designed to attach to whoever's caring for you at the point that you're born. In other words, mother goose.

It could be a fox that's standing around at that point. And you attach to a fox, and you're a little gosling, well, that's very bad news. It's much worse than a biologist.

You could attach to a robot. The point being that the content-- the representational content-- is not given. The instinct is. So the instinct says, I must attach to whoever's around when I hatch. But if the wrong thing's around when you hatch, you're going to attach to the wrong thing.

A sort of slightly facetious analogy is fetishism. I mean, think about it. You get people whose whole sexual life is about stiletto heels, or worse. You shouldn't be sexually attached to stiletto heels. You're not going to have much reproductive success that way. But the instinct, the sexual instinct, built into it is not what sort of object you should attach to. That depends on experience.

And you can extrapolate from the example that I've just given to the broader question that's being raised about irrational behaviour. The question is, why do we have irrational behaviour if we have these instincts that are designed in such a rational fashion? That's how it happens. It's because the whole thing is not in the instinct. The instinct is just a kind of tool which you then have to marry to the world of experience in order to learn how to use that tool.

And that's also for very good reasons. It's because you can't predict everything about the environmental niche that you're going to be born into. That's why it has to be nuanced. That's one reason why everything can't be built into the instinct.

The other reason why you have to have cognitions, you have to have an individualised ego, as the psychoanalysts call it. A me, which is my personality that isn't born. But it's in fact me. It's the thing that evolves between the world that I find myself in, and the instincts that I'm born with, and the feelings they give rise to.

It's not only because the world that you're born into is unpredictable. They're nuanced and you have to have flexibility for that reason. It's also that you need to have this thinking apparatus, because instincts can be incompatible with each other.

An obvious example. You attach to say, a mum, your mum. This is your attachment object. And you feel all of this affectionate bond toward her. But that's the attachment instinct. You also have a rage instinct. That same person that you've attached to, and that you need so terribly desperately for your survival, can be also the object that frustrates you and arouses your rath, and you want to bite her, and kick her, and kill her.

Now you've got a conflict. You've got a problem. You've got the same object that you so badly need is an object that you want to annihilate. You've got two instincts, both of which have very good reasons-- survival and reproductive success-wise for being there. But they give rise to two opposite motivational intentions in the real world. And these need to be reconciled with each other.

So it's how we resolve these conflicts is again the spawning ground for irrational behaviour, because there's no right way to do it. It's a problem. You've got to resolve this. You've got to come up with some sort of compromise. And some compromises work better than others. So I hope that that general principle is clear.

I want to now head towards suicide. Again, using this concept of there being, first of all, the instinctual affective tendencies, and secondly, the representations of the objects in the world that are invested with these instinctual forces. We have in this representational world, as I've just said, you can have one representation of a mother that you love, and another representation of a mother that you hate. And somehow these two things have to be amalgamated with each other. Or not. You can also have what psychoanalysts call splitting.

And I'm sure you all know it from your relationships. One day you think, oh she's wonderful. I couldn't possibly do without her. The next day, oh my God, I can't stand you. You're driving me crazy. And it's the same person. You feel very differently about that person at two different times.

The same applies to representations of ourselves. You have one picture of yourself in one emotional state, driven by one instinctual motivational force, and another one of yourself in another emotional state driven by another instinctual force. It sounds strange. But really it is so. You know if from your own experience that it is so. And the neuroscience of how these instincts and the cognitions relate to each other makes it imminently plausible.

Why I'm telling you about all of this is that in your mind the rageful feeling which is designed for your survival-- there's a very good reason why you have it-- it can be directed now against this person, now against that person. And the psychoanalysts call this "displacement." If it's directed towards this person say, the mum that I love, and I can't attack her, because I need her. So the rage against her gets directed against somebody else.

We can do that sort of thing with the most incredible alacrity, the most incredible mental gymnastics. And that leads to this apparently bizarre and irrational state where you end up attacking yourself, hating yourself, doing harm to yourself, which is in fact, giving expression to an angry feeling that was originally directed toward somebody else. But the way you resolve the conflict was to deflect it, in this case, to internalise it against some image of yourself.

Now if I'm beginning to sound like Freud, forgive me. But it really is the case that you speak to people who survive suicide attempts, a very interesting thing comes out. So frequently they will tell you how they imagined, you know, why they were killing themselves, was that so they could get the satisfaction of seeing so and so feeling such and such. Say, for example, at their funeral. But they're not there at their funeral. They're dead.

And it shows you that in fact there is one representation that's being attacked and killed. And there's another representation that's getting satisfaction out of that. And you see again this whole thing about mental conflict and compromise and so on.

So to bring all of this down to a simple hope and perspicacious statement, the instinct of aggression is itself a rational thing. In other words, it serves a useful biological purpose. But it can, through cognitive processes, be deflected into irrational behaviours.

So instincts themselves-- there is no such thing as an instinct for committing suicide. But in terms of trying to resolve all of the conflicts and difficulties that arise in relation to an infinitely complex outside world can end up in behaviour like suicide.

Now there were two further points to this question which I just quickly want to mop up. The one was what does this tell us about Freud's death drive. I'm speaking about instincts as if they're all jolly good things for survival and reproductive success. But Freud said there was a death drive. And then there's the question, is there not something that's beyond the pleasure principle? Are there not some behaviours which are not motivated by the pursuit of pleasure?

Freud was a very great genius. There's no question about it. But Freud also was wrong about many things. Inevitably, Freud was working 100 years ago at a time that we really knew very little about brain mechanisms of instincts and of drives.

And so it's no surprise that we've learned a great deal more about instincts and drives since Freud's day. And that therefore, we found that there are conclusions that Freud

came to which are probably incorrect. One of them relates to the taxonomy of these instincts. There are many more of them than Freud thought. Freud thought that there were two.

And Freud thought that the one was this libidinal-- broadly speaking pleasure-seeking sexual instinct. And the other was this unpleasure-avoiding, not wanting to have any, tolerate any frustration, any difficulty, which is inevitably what life is about. Life is frustrating and difficult. So Freud called it a death drive. The thing that wants to just withdraw from life and all of its difficulties, and go into a state of Nirvana into a state of blissful nothingness.

Now Freud also thought that there was a pleasure/unpleasure series. That on the one end of this affect-regulating mechanism in our minds there's pleasure, and at the other end is unpleasure. And you're somewhere along that gradient. This is the pleasure/unpleasure principle. At any one point in time you're somewhere along this gradient. And you're always trying to find as much pleasure as possible.

It's perfectly plausible that there would be two mechanisms. There doesn't have to only be one. There could be one mechanism which is a pleasure-seeking mechanism. And there could be another one which is a unpleasure avoiding mechanism. And they don't in fact, have to be two ends of the same gradient.

And by saying that, I'm leading towards this observation which I've already implicitly said, which is that there are actually many more instincts at work in the human mind and the mammalian mind than Freud thought. And each of them is a particular variety of pleasure and unpleasure. There isn't an overarching pleasure/unpleasure series.

There are multiple pleasures and multiple unpleasures. And some instincts are purely unpleasure avoiding ones, like the rage instinct. And other ones are purely pleasure-seeking ones like the seeking instinct.

And I think that all of the phenomena that Freud hypothesised, or that Freud formulated under the hypothesis of a death drive could be better explained, for example, just by saying, well there's a unpleasure avoiding tendency in the mind. And in fact, there are multiple unpleasure avoiding tendencies in the mind at an instinctual level. And these better explain, I think, the clinical phenomena that Freud referred to when he formulated this death drive.

So for those of you not interested in Freud, I'm sorry to have said so much about that. But I hope that you can see that we do have information, data, that is irrelevant to the sorts of things that these questions are about-- irrational behaviour, suicide, self-destructive tendencies, and so on. But we're formulating them slightly differently these days.

This is an exciting times, I think A coming together of psychiatry and psychoanalysis and so on with brain science. Coming together with the complexities of lived life on the one hand, and the rigour of natural science on the other. This is what I think is exciting.



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