

Week 4 Answer to Question 3
Step 5.3 Ask Mark

Ok. We're going to move straight on to question 3, and it goes like this:

Question 3: following that the pleasure/unpleasure principles are the biological determinants of our decisions, and underpin our value choices, does this mean that we humans are absolutely egocentric, even when motivated by higher needs like self-actualization, or social justice, or human rights? How is it that martyrs will ignore the unpleasure of social rejection and can pursue higher needs? It seems we decide to endure what we expect to be lesser pain in the service of greater pleasure, and that underpins value-related decisions. Is there no point at which humans become noble, not merely bestial?

Well, there are two main points I'd like to make here - the first is that it is not actually true to say that all of our instinctual, bestial modes of functioning are selfish, are not pro-social, entail no altruism. Perhaps the best example is the so-called maternal instinct. We don't use the word maternal instinct because it implies it's something that only females have. There's a nurturant instinct - Jaak Panksepp calls it the care system - and it involves the instinctual response - prototypically - it involves the instinctual response to a little one in distress. When a baby's crying, you don't need to philosophize about it, you don't need to think your way through the problem and wonder what to do. There's an intuitive, innate, automatic inclination to pick the baby up, and to rock it, and to say googly googly sort of things to it. It causes great discomfort to have a baby crying, to see a baby distressed, and to not be able to do anything about it. So that's an instinctual response, and in fact it's something that all mammals share, all mammals have this instinctual response. It's mediated by brain chemicals like estrogen, progesterone, prolactin and oxytocin, all of which, on average, are at higher levels in females of the species than males. But that's only on the average, and it also depends on the situation, for example pregnancy and childbirth lead to great increases in the levels of these chemicals, as in fact does sexual intercourse.

So there are pro-social instincts. Another one - perhaps a less well-known one - is play. All mammals play, juvenile mammals play, and play is enormously rewarding to the animal. They really want to do it. But play doesn't work unless there are two of you. and there has to be

something in it for both. We refer to the 60/40 rule, which describes the fact that unless the submissive member in the dominant/submissive couple - which is always what happens in a play episode - somebody's doing the chasing, somebody's on top - I'm talking about rough-and-tumble play here - if one is not given at least forty percent of the chances to be the one doing the chasing or to be the one on top, then it's not fun for them anymore, and then they won't play anymore. If the submissive member of the couple doesn't get to have some turns, and they won't play anymore, then the dominant one doesn't have a playmate, and so they don't get the pleasure, the sort of joyous, exuberant fun of playing is denied them. So the play instinct actually has built into the way that it operates, built into what is rewarding about it, the need to take account of the experience of the other. And this is a very basic instinct, something you find in mice and rats, you know, it's all mammals - 200 million years old this instinct. In fact, even birds play - it's more than 200 million years old. So there we have a very ancient, very primitive, very bestial instinctual tendency which is pro-social, which is altruistic, which does take account of the other.

Now I know - I'm moving on to the second issue - I know that the questioner isn't referring only to that level of functioning, when - is it that he or she - when she asks about the noble side, the martyrs, the people who sacrifice their own pleasures for the greater - or for the greater good or for the longer run and so on - these things happen too, but I just want to make clear that we do have ethics, even in our most primitive brain mechanisms, which are in the service not only of the individual but also of the social group, because our survival and reproductive success in part is dependent on the survival of others, and especially of our own in-group as we call it. But those higher functions that you're referring to, that the questioner is referring to, they do entail further processes.

The first one I want to mention is in fact also quite a basic process, which boils down to the fact that instincts can conflict with each other. So some sort of decision has to be made, or some sort of third alternative, some middle path has to be found. A good example is that we have a rage instinct - if something's frustrating you and getting your way, you annihilate the thing to get rid of it. That's the rage instinctual response. Another instinct is the attachment instinct. We mammals - and again this applies to birds - we need somebody to look after us when we're little, so we form attachment bonds, and that brain mechanism becomes the basis of our later pair bonding, and all these affiliative bonds that so characterize our species. The prototype for that instinct is the attitude of the little one to the mother. So there you have an instinctual attitude of "I love her, I need her, she makes me feel safe, I depend on her." Warm, fuzzy great feeling, but that same person can be very frustrating. And so at times your rage instinct will be activated toward the very same mother that you so need, depend upon, etc. There you have a conflict, now what do you do? This is not an unusual situation, it's a situation that every infant finds itself in. And so there's a need to develop some sort of hybrid, some sort of compromise. And that compromise, in the example I'm giving you, is called guilt. Guilt is inhibition of the rage, turning

of it inwards, in order to protect the object, because you value the object, love the object as we say. So guilt, which is a very important component of what we think of as higher social emotions, of concern for the other, in fact is a product of two very - of the conflict between two very primitive tendencies. But then, higher still, is the requirement to inhibit all of the instinctual responses, and to think up something entirely new.

Now it never happens that we think up something that has no instinctual motivation whatever, but if none of the instincts is even remotely the right thing to do, you know, then what's needed is some kind of very complicated alloy between them, plus a whole lot of learning that's not in the instincts at all. And this situation, in the most general way, was demanded by a dramatic change that occurred in our species about 10 to 12 thousand years ago, and that's when we started to domesticate animals, to keep animals rather than hunt them. We would have herds of sheep and goats and and cattle. And also to plant crops rather than to just gather in the wild. We realized "Hang on a minute. Why do we keep on doing this all the time, why don't we just plant some and keep them here, and then we can harvest them, you know, seasonally?" And with that change - which came, as I said, 10 to 12 thousand years ago, no question about it, the archaeological record shows that - this led to a dramatic change in the social group structure. First of all, groups became - stayed in one place permanently. We were no longer hunters and gatherers, nomadically wandering about, we were - there were permanent settlements, which requires a whole - which creates a whole new set of problems, like property ownership, like you know, how do you divide your property from my property, how do I give my property to my successors? And also problems arising from the fact that the groups then became much larger. Hunter gatherer nomadic bands, they only work up to a certain size. But villages now started forming, and so there were social structures for which we have absolutely no instinctual preparedness. In addition to the fact that the permanence of the settlements that I've described, built into it is the notion of planning for the future. Instincts don't plan for the future - they deal with the here-and-now, all of them. So there was a need to come up with new solutions, and the fact that these changes in our social structure occurred, was itself the product of changes in our brain anatomy. Greater prefrontal cortex, which has two main functions - the one is to suppress instinct, to inhibit instinct, and the second is to think, that is to say to not act, to have virtual actions, experimental actions in the safety of your mind - if I do this, this will happen, if I do that, that will happen. Then you come to the conclusion this one seems like it'll work best, this future action will work best, ok now I release the action and I do it. That's what gave rise, this thinking processes, gave rise to all of these uniquely human artificial solutions. Things like the law, written down - the Ten Commandments being the archetypal one there, but you know nowadays we have international criminal courts, we have we have the United Nations, we have the European Union courts codifying how we have to behave in relation to each other, which has nothing to do with instinct, or very little, and everything to do with these higher, noble sentiments. So that's how it works.

Certainly us humans are therefore - there's a point when we become less than bestial, and that's this point that I'm describing, that occurred 10 to 12 thousand years ago. Now here's the rub - in evolutionary time, the instincts that I was talking about earlier, are 200 or more million years old, and these artificial constructions of our frontal cortical structures are 10 to 12 thousand years old, at best. You know, 200 million plus vs 10 to 12 thousand or less - weigh them up, which one do you think is the more powerful? I'm afraid that is why, as noble as these declarations of human rights and so on are, if you look at what we actually do, we're a little bit closer to the animals than we'd like to admit. Which is not to say that that's ok, but I think we need to know, we need to acknowledge, that we are at bottom animals, and that we've got this little cork - on the ocean of our instinctuality - which bobs about there, and we're very lucky to have it, we need all the help we can get - we're living in an environment that's totally unlike what's predicted by the instincts that we were born with - on the basis of all these million years of experience of all these mammals long and long and long and long ago - we need something else, but I just don't think we should overrate our capacity to truly transcend our instinctual animal natures. Hope that gives you some sense of balance, and doesn't make you depressed.



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