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How strong are instincts?

People will sometimes argue that if a behaviour isn't genetic, it is so deeply part of them it might as well be. They usually mean that the behaviour is long-term, thoroughly embedded, and seems to be quite resistant to efforts to change it. If people wanted to argue that homosexuality was like a powerful human instinct, what might that mean? Would it mean it was unchangeable?

We all have some strong instincts; if a car tries to run us over, we dodge, and faster than we might imagine! Survival is probably our strongest instinct, the maternal instinct could be next, and the infant's instinct to suckle, eat, and sleep is a close third.

We have an instinctive fear of loud noises and fast movement of a dangerous object toward us: our body goes into the fight/flight reaction and we either attack or run for our lives! We have a blinking reflex when something comes near our eyes; digestive reflexes; a pain reflex, e.g. instantaneous removal of a hand from a flame. Sleep seems to be a reflex when we are very tired. The contractions of childbirth are a reflex. We have a knee-jerk reaction when we're hit just below the kneecap. Even male ejaculation is a reflex—it can be triggered by an electric shock. Then there is the sneezing reflex, yawning...you can add to the list.

Can we train our instincts?

Waft enough dust or pepper into someone's nose, and almost everyone will sneeze. We sneeze instinctively. Or do we? It's true that we sneeze in response to the reaction between the dust and our nose, but there is a pause during which we can stop or go on. A finger hard under the nose may stop a sneeze; looking at bright light may encourage it; sleeping stops it (we don't sneeze while we sleep!). Doctors can stop labour contractions with drugs; we can stifle a yawn. Some reflexes can be trained, and trained surprisingly far. It is natural to blink when something is put in your eye, but if you wear contact lenses you can learn to control that and (usually) not blink until the lens is in the eye.

We can train many of our most basic instincts. We can train ourselves to ignore hunger pangs, and fast for religious or other reasons. When we have gone without food for a few days, we are not taken over by reflexes which force us to drop everything and concentrate all our attentions on getting food—indeed, after a few days the hunger pangs tend to disappear altogether and reappear only after the traditional forty days fast, when the body is at its last extremity. Considering we'll die quite soon if we don't eat, it's amazing how weak the influence of hunger on behaviour is.

Similarly, although we will die or go mad if deprived of sleep for weeks, the sleep reflex is not overwhelming. Adolescents can keep themselves awake for an all-night event!

As a baby grows, it slowly learns to lose its fear of heights, at least enough to climb trees, hills, and in extreme cases mountains and overhanging rock faces. The rock climber may even enjoy the tension and fear! Blondin walking a tightrope over the Niagara Falls; Houdini the escape artist bound in chains, locked in a casket and dropped underwater; both had brought their survival instincts under control and revelled in the risk. Soldiers trained in mock battle conditions, senses assaulted by the loud shock of nearby explosions, learn to overcome their fear of death and obey orders. On the real battle field their training holds up—they fight rather than fly. So even the fear of death can be controlled.

Maternal instinct

The mothering instinct is among the most powerful instincts. In the animal kingdom, timid ewes will charge humans and dogs if their lambs

are threatened. Most mothers will protect their young. You would expect the mothering instinct in man to be more deeply programmed than in any species, because the newborn baby is unusually defenseless at birth. Its brain is so undeveloped that it will die if it is not mothered for the first few years. Mothers are equipped to conceive, carry, and suckle their young. They appear to be the natural nurturers.

Fathers don't appear to have the same instinct to nurture. Surveys usually show that they spend only about one third of the time with their children that mothers do.¹ Are human males biologically programmed to be poor nurturers, much more instinctively geared to fight aggressively outside the home to provide food for their families? Are we like the rats? The female rat constantly attentive to her young, licking, feeding, and guarding them, and looking after the nest structure; the male rat a menace, aggressively biting, and even eating young rats! Is this evidence for strong instinctive differences between male and female?

If that is the case, then it can certainly be reprogrammed. In an unusual experiment, biologist Jay Rosenblatt² took several-day-old rats and put them in with virgin females. The females showed no mothering instincts and of course could not nurse the pups, so the pups tended to languish. Rosenblatt replaced the pups each day, and by the sixth day there was an enormous change in the behaviour of the virgin females. They began to look after the pups, licking them, retrieving them, and even more astonishingly, lying down as though trying to nurse them. Even though they were not primed by the hormonal changes of pregnancy, the presence of the pups alone was sufficient to trigger the maternal behaviour.

Rosenblatt tried exactly the same thing with adult male rats. After six days, the males started behaving just like the virgin females: licking the pups, retrieving them when they strayed, and even lying down as though trying to nurse them! In other words, maternal "instincts" were evoked by the presence of the pups in male rats, sometimes known to eat their infant offspring.

In rhesus monkeys the typical indifference of male monkeys towards infants can be broken down to the extent that they will show "maternalistic feelings as tender and solicitous as any shown by a rhesus mother" to any infant who needs care.²

There is a celebrated instance in which a wild bitch died five weeks after giving birth, and the remaining five adult male dogs raised the nine pups themselves.² In about 40% of primates, males care for the young. Sometimes they snatch the infant from the mother apparently for the sheer pleasure of carrying it about. Among the marmoset and tamarin monkeys, it is hard to say which is the primary caregiver.

Obviously, male behaviour is not firmly and instinctively imprinted in lower animals. It can be radically changed. The old rule applies: if lower animals, whose behaviour is much more biologically programmed than ours, can retrain natural instincts, then human beings can to a much greater degree. The modern woman who insists that men are quite capable of mothering and nurturing children appears to have science on her side; fathers are certainly able to increase the quality time they already spend with their children.³ Certainly “house-husbands” have brought up very young children. With glass bottles and rubber teats, a father can even nurse a child! There have even been a few rare cases of older men who (probably through some hormonal disturbance) were able to breast-feed young children. Similar hormonally disturbed cases, some induced by hormone treatment to fight tumours, are reported reasonably frequently.⁴

Nor is maternal behaviour an over-riding instinct in human females. Some human mothers abandon their babies at birth. Hundreds of thousands of babies are aborted each year. Some women are poor mothers; some men make good ones. It seems the mothering instinct can be developed or neglected in a woman, and evoked in a man. If this is so what might be possible for same-sex attraction?

Irises

We never usually think about adapting to bright light—our irises adapt automatically and we don't think about it. How would we go about training that reflex even if we wanted to? Norman Doidge⁵ describes that this change has happened in one ethnic group even though they have not set out to do it deliberately. The Sea Gypsies are a tribe who make their living mostly from the sea by diving. They live in the Burmese archipelago. Remarkably they can see at depth in the sea without goggles, by adjusting the irises in their eyes—probably producing the same effect as a pin-hole camera with its greater depth of field. Swedish researchers who

found this were initially most surprised because the reflex was thought to be unchangeable. But they were ultimately able to teach Swedish children to do much the same. Training can change brain circuits—what do you have that you think is a reflex but needs changing?

Sexuality

The urge to reproduce—to ensure the survival of the species—is a powerful instinct. But, like the survival instinct and the maternal instinct, it is not an overwhelming reflex. In fact, it can be controlled with training, as many in religious orders know. A significant minority (about 10%) of the general population has no wish to reproduce at all. So the urge to perpetuate the species is obviously not an overriding drive.

Actually, our sexual instincts often have to be rather vigorously prodded before they'll move into the driver's seat. The ejaculation reflex only takes over when a certain threshold of stimulation is passed, and usually quite a bit of stimulation is needed. We might not want to stop, but we can. Our instincts do not control us. An interesting proverb says, "Blessed is the man who controls his spirit [the drives which move him in various ways]. He is better than the man who captures a castle" (Pro 16:32). What makes our sexuality appear so powerful is all the training it gets. We are encouraged to express the sexual side of our natures. So, even though our urge or need for sexual expression might end up feeling irresistible, it's really no more than an over-developed instinct, demand-fed hundreds of times for decades.

Homosexuality

Homosexuals cannot reproduce, so homosexual activity cannot be considered an instinct to perpetuate the species. If it could be called an instinct, it is no less malleable than any other of the powerful instincts that man experiences, which, we have seen, are subject to a huge degree to man's will and other environmental influences.

Addiction

Addiction is not an instinct, but can become something very close to an instinct. The surfaces of body cells are chemically configured in such a way that they resemble a lock waiting for the right key to turn in it. The chemistry of certain drugs is like the key that turns perfectly in the

receptors of cells in certain organs of the body, and, after a while, the reaction becomes a part of cell life, creating a chemical dependency which the body feels as a need. If pleasurable sensations accompany the process and this “hooks” into some way into emotional relief, then an addictive cycle begins, minimal at the start but increasing in strength until it seems almost impossible to control. Is addictive behaviour an uncontrollable compulsion? Has the cell physiology made us do it? No, we helped it hundreds of times. But it’s possible to reverse the process and rediscover the old normalcy (or find a new one).

Conclusion

We can learn to bring our instincts under control, or we can allow our instincts to control us. Instincts develop because they are fed. No behaviour takes us over without years of encouragement. If we have spent all our lives cultivating a certain behaviour by thousands of repeated actions and responses, then it will eventually seem like a powerful urge—so powerful that it seems irresistible, or even genetically programmed. But nothing is unchangeable. If we can lose our fear of death with training, and even enjoy the risks, if fathers can become “mothers,” then sexual reflexes can also be trained. It may take a few years to reverse the training we have given them, but it can be done.

We are created to be voluntary animals, not involuntary ones. On these grounds alone, it makes no sense at all to maintain we are doing something we just can’t help doing. Somehow, we have trained ourselves into the habit. Though not without difficulty, we can just as effectively train ourselves out of it, if we really want to. But we will need the help of others and of a Higher Power.

Homosexuality, if some want to call it an instinct, is no different from any other instinct.

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