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REPORTING ON THE MEANING AND THE EXCELLENCE OF LIFE

ACADEMIA

Simon Baron-Cohen: Meaning, Testosterone and Gonad

BY NICOLAE TANASE ON APRIL 13, 2015 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)

“What is the meaning of life?” and “What is the purpose of life?” are two subtly distinct questions. Darwinian biologists might respond to the latter question with reference to a single answer: reproduction. From an evolutionary perspective, all living organisms could be said to



exist for one purpose only: to reproduce themselves.

Evolution has produced a remarkable range of solutions to ensure that the genetic code makes it into the next generation and survives for eternity, and for many animal species the solution involves mating. And evolution has even made sure as animals we keep this goal in the forefront of our minds, by making mating fun and pleasurable. An extreme reductionist biological view is that the body and the brain of an animal evolved to enable the essential part of the animal – their DNA – to jump from one generation to the next, via reproduction. (Evolution is of course blind to what it is doing, so we should not read any teleology into this).

From this perspective, the purpose of life centres on the gonad (the ovary or the testes) as the core of the animal. The rest of the body, and even the brain itself, could be said to only exist to enable the gonad to grow, function, and to enable reproduction.

Evolution has produced an exquisite timetable for the unfolding of the development of the gonad and the reproductive system: At the moment of conception, the human fetus has no sex because the gonad is 'bipotential'. It could become a testes or an ovary. In a human being, the presence of the SRY (the Sex Determining Region on the Y chromosome) gene triggers the growth of the testes, which then produces the hormone testosterone, and the testes secretes another hormone, AMH (Anti-Müllerian hormone), which suppresses of the development of the ovary.

The amount of testosterone the fetus produces during the 8th to the 12th week of pregnancy (the 'prenatal masculinization window') permanently changes the person's body, brain, and behaviour, including our mating behavior, so that from an initial starting state where the fetus has no gonadal or hormonal sex, we end up with the gonadal and the hormonal profile of a male or female.

But not all humans reproduce. Some want to but their

biology frustrates them, yet they still have a purpose to their lives. Others make the choice not to reproduce. This means the purpose of life for humans cannot simply be reduced to the biology of the gonad. Such individuals remind us that our sense of the purpose of life is intrinsically interwoven with the other question: what is the meaning of life? Humans create meaning not only by slavishly following the signals of our gonadal hormones, but by reflecting consciously on what counts as a good life. The meaning of life turns out not to be a biological question, but a moral one.

For some, a good life is the creation of a family, and helping to foster the happiness and security of the next generation; for others a good life lies in helping others who are not genetically related to oneself, but where we can still do more than just help ourselves. Just helping ourselves to more resources is ultimately a selfish life, and any surplus resources we have accrued could simply die with us. In contrast, helping others, in small ways (being a friendly neighbour) or in bigger ways (philanthropically, or supporting another person in their times of struggle, or with the gift of friendship, or through acts of altruism) means each of us are making the world a nicer, better place. We are adding to the total good in the world.

For me, the meaning of life lies in our actions – what we do to help others. The meaning of life lies in acts of kindness towards others. Interestingly, scientists, philosophers, and religionists all converge on this answer.

~Simon Baron-Cohen, author, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, Director of the Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University
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