

Understanding how our emotions guide us

Have you ever wondered why food that is good for you tastes good and poison tastes bad? Do you think that is a coincidence? It's not. It's evolution at work. Primitive life depends on massive reproduction with the idea that 99.9% of them are going to die. But as life evolves those things with the best survival skills live on and that with bad survival skills die off. So over time life developed taste to try to determine if something we are about to eat is going to nourish us or kill us. If good food tastes good and poison tastes bad then we are more likely to be the one that survives.

Emotions control our behavior the way taste controls where we eat.

Emotions are to behavior as taste is to eating. Our emotions control our behavior the same way taste helps us choose the right food. Fear, for example, is easy to understand. When our ancestors hear something rustling in the bushes they start running in fear before they see the tiger chasing them. Those who were afraid at the right time are our ancestors. Those who were afraid too late became food for the ancestors of tigers.

Over billions of years emotions evolved. Unpleasant emotions prevent us from doing what is wrong. Pleasant emotions help us do what is right. Our emotions have been crudely programmed by evolution and the emotions that help us survive statistically triumph over the emotions that don't. Those with more accurate emotional programming do better than those who get it wrong.

Evolution created emotions to help us do the right thing it takes to survive.

Many people, when asked what the purpose of life is answer, "Happiness". But what is happiness. Is that something that is scientifically specific enough to be a criteria? Some people are broken and what makes them happy is not what makes most people happy. For example, killing Jews makes Hitler happy. And we all know that's not the right answer.

But - if we look at happiness as an evolved set of emotional programming that helps us to survive then we can see that the pursuit of happiness is really the pursuit of survival. And I think we can all agree that if we create a world where humanity thrives and continues to evolve in a positive direction that people would be happy. And if we do the wrong thing and that we devolve into mass destruction, chaos, the collapse of society then we will be unhappy. And if we really take the wrong path then we cease to exist and happiness goes away completely.

Humans evolved to work as a group. To function as a society. We had to get along in tribal society sitting around the fire to keep warm, hunting and cooking food, growing crops, and defending the tribe from predators and enemies in other tribes. In order to do that we had to evolve behavior to get along. Our brains evolved to process speech to communicate more and more complex ideas. And our emotions evolved so that we could function as a group.

People have asked, "Where does spirituality fit into the Church of Reality?" Religious people make the argument that it is that spiritual connection, coming from a deity, that teaches us right and wrong "in our heart". Of course we know that deities don't exist and if the deity doesn't exist then it can't cause things. But yet the spiritual sensation is still there. What is that?

Spirituality is Darwin giving us emotional candy for playing nice with others.

Just like taste is evolution's way of teaching us what to eat, emotions are evolution's way of teaching us how to behave to survive. Since we need to work as a group, as a tribe, we have evolved emotional rewards for doing the right thing. Feeling spiritual is like Darwin giving us a gold star for good behavior. When we feel we are part of a group and that we are connected to a greater purpose then we feel spiritual. The spiritual sensation always involves a real or imagined connection to other people. That's why Atheists have spiritual experiences.

When we play nice with others we are rewarded with happy feelings. If we become leaders we feel the power of having a high social status as a valued member of the community. In the case of males it causes females to want to mate with us.

Women are attracted to men of high social status. People wonder how things like music, art, dancing relate to evolution. These are things that bond us as a group. Help us work together as a tribe to take care of each other, to bond. When you look at evolution as survival and realize that group bonding was necessary then a lot of social behavior and emotional behavior all of a sudden makes sense.