

Response to EDGE Question 2002. "What is your Question"

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"To be or not to be?"

Old questions don't go away (at least while they remain unanswered). Suppose Edge were to have asked Hamlet for his Y 2002 question We can guess the answer. "Sorry, John, I know it's a bit of a cliché, but it's the same question it has always been." Suppose Edge turned next to Albert Camus. "John, I said it in 1942 and I'm still waiting. 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest — whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories — comes afterwards.'"

Clichés they may be. But I'd say there's every reason for students of human nature to continue to treat these questions with due seriousness: and in particular to think further about who has been asking them, when, and why, and with what consequences. It may seem a paradox that human beings should have evolved to have a love-hate relationship with their own existence. But in fact there may be a simple Darwinian story to be told about how it has come to be so.

Let's accept the stark truth that individual human beings have been designed by natural selection to be, in Dawkins' famous phrase, "survival machines" whose primary function is to help the genes they carry to make it into future generations. We should admit, then, that, from this evolutionary viewpoint, an individual human life cannot be considered an end in itself but only a means to promoting the success of genes.

Yet the fact is that in the human case (and maybe the human case alone) natural selection has devised a peculiarly effective trick for persuading individual survival machines to fulfill this seemingly bleak role. Every human being is endowed with the mental programs for developing a "conscious self" or "soul": a soul which not only values its own survival but sees itself as very much an end in its own right (in fact a soul which, in a fit of solipsism, may even consider itself the one and only source of all the ends there are!). Such a soul, besides doing all it can to ensure its own basic comfort and security, will typically strive for

self-development: through learning, creativity, spiritual growth, symbolic expression, consciousness-raising, and so on. These activities redound to the advantage of mind and body. The result is that such "selfish souls" do indeed make wonderful agents for "selfish genes".

There has, however, always been a catch. Naturally-designed "survival machines" are not, as the name might imply machines designed to go on and on surviving: instead they are machines designed to survive only up to a point — this being the point where the genes they carry have nothing more to gain (or even things to lose) from continued life. For it's a sobering fact that genes are generally better off taking passage and propagating themselves in younger machines than older ones (the older ones will have begun to accumulate defects, to have become set in their ways, to have acquired more than enough dependents, etc.) It suits genes therefore that their survival machines should have a limited life-time, after which they can be scrapped.

Thus, in a scenario that has all the makings of tragedy (if not a tragic farce), natural selection has, on the one hand, been shaping up individual human beings at the level of their souls to believe in themselves and their intrinsic worth, while on the other hand taking steps to ensure that these same individuals on the level of their bodies grow old and die — and, most likely, since by this stage of a life the genes no longer have any interest in preventing it, to die miserably, painfully and in a state of dreadful disillusion.

However, here's the second catch. In order for this double-game that the genes are playing to be successful, it's essential that the soul they've designed does not see what's coming and realise the extent to which it has been duped, at least until too late. But this means preventing the soul, or at any rate cunningly diverting it, from following some of the very lines of inquiry on which it has been set up to place its hopes: looking to the future, searching for eternal truths, and so on. In Camus' words "Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined".

The history of human psychology and culture has revolved around this contradiction built into human nature. Science has not had much to say about it. But it may yet.