

## WE ALL WANT TO BE SOMEBODY

Adam Smith's book *Wealth of Nations* (1776) is credited with the intellectual founding of free-market capitalism. He is quoted as commenting on people behaving in ways, in particular spending money, which on purely economic terms make no sense to him: "How many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility." Another English economist, John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), introduced the term "animal spirits" to the economic dialogue as a way to describe the seemingly irrational behavior of the way people spent their money—the type of behavior Smith was describing.

Economists develop incredibly complex mathematical models to explain how people spend their money and how markets work. Yet, at times economists are troubled by how often these attempts to quantify human economic behavior miss their mark. So what do they do to save their science, they introduce fudge factors such as "animal spirits." The most recent case of this is Alan Greenspan's coining the term "irrational exuberance" to explain the market bubble in the 1990s. Smith, Keynes, and Greenspan were struggling to identify the mysterious hand that seemed to cause their quantitative and purely logical analysis to miss the bullseye in predicting people's spending habits.

I use these examples from the history of economics of all places as a starting point to describe and then explain the origins of a pattern of behavior in which all humans engage. A pattern that can be the source of much trouble in our lives. Understanding its origins should be of some value, a tool for us to use as we try to whittle away those aspects of our lives that make us troubled and lead us astray from achieving our goals.

My starting point is the theme that appears in many of the essays on this web site since it so fundamental to our having insight into why we act and feel the way that we do. Like it or not, in particular for those who find a more "soulfully" based explanation for behavior more appealing, it is the neural circuits of our brain that act as the disc drive that holds the programs

that run our behavior. In addition, these circuits and programs come from our genes. Genes that we share to a frightening degree with our animal ancestors, about 98% of our genes are shared with the chimpanzee. Therefore the studies of chimp behavior by primatologists such as Jane Goodall ought to prove useful in helping us to understand our own behavior. Our brain's biology is indeed in so many ways our destiny.

Adam Smith died well over a century before Jane Goodall, Konrad Lorenz, and other pioneers of studying animal behavior were even born. If Adam Smith knew what these folks have taught us about the animal origins of human behavior, I doubt if he would have said the same thing about "frivolous utility." If Keynes had delved into the then new fields of study involving the brain and behavior, I expect he might have put a little more meat on the bones of "animal spirits" and the same for Alan Greenspan's "irrational exuberance." It is only now in the twenty-first century that a field called "Neuroeconomics" has begun to emerge with some legitimacy.

Our nearest animal ancestor, chimpanzees, spend their days engaged in subtle and sometimes not so subtle activities to try to place themselves as high as possible in the dominance hierarchy of their social group. If human, it would be called an obsession. Understandably so since for chimps placing as high as possible is very important. The higher your rank then the better your chance that a female will let you have sex with her, you would have preferred access to food, and you were protected from attack by the group's dominant male (aka warlord). A lone chimp that does not live within a hierarchical troop is a dead chimp, the same is true for wolves, lions, etc, all animals that live in social groups.

Being high-up in the hierarchy, a pattern of *instinctual* behavior, conferred a tremendous survival advantage and thus became permanently encoded in a specie's genetic information. Our human *instinctual* need to have a place in a hierarchy, the need "to be somebody," is as thoroughly programmed into the neural circuits of our brain as in a chimps: "top dog, leader

of the pack, corner office, and “big swinging dick” of the book *Liars Poker* fame. In both animals and humans, the feelings of self-esteem experienced through achieving these positions of dominance are necessary to mental health. Nothing is more correlated with *depression* than loss of self-esteem. Self-esteem, like it or not, does not exist in a vacuum, but comes only from our sense of importance/superiority in comparison with others.

If the only utility of a watch is to tell us the time and date, then why pay \$10,000 when \$50 will purchase a watch of the same utility. If the utility of a car is reliable and comfortable transportation, why pay \$100,000 when \$25,000 will provide identical utility. Described in only these terms how can one not agree that paying the higher prices of these items are Adam Smith’s “frivolous utility,” and an example of Keynes’ “animal spirits” at work. For some whose need to satisfy their *instinctual drives* is bigger than their wallet, buying seemingly frivolous utility has probably caused the “ruin” described by Smith.

Thanks to the animal behaviorists, no more “frivolous” utility to driving that \$100,000 car or wearing the \$10,000 watch. Instead, a utility that is a center piece of our mental health, our position at or near the top of a dominance hierarchy—that we are somebody, at least in the eyes of our peers. Just as Marlon Brando in *On The Waterfront*, while reflecting on his life lamented to his brother Charlie: “I could’ve had class. I could’ve been somebody,” we all want to be somebody. It is in our genes: our animal spirit.

Adam Smith and frivolous utility take that. Here they are John Maynard Keynes, the animal spirits clearly at work in driving markets. From clothing stores to jewelry shops and car dealers to name just a few, full of products that speak not of their utility in providing core function, but simply what they add to our emotional sense of well-being, that we are somebody. Our “irrational exuberance” drives us on to participate in ever more dicey financing/credit structures and hopes to get rich through gambling on “story” stocks instead of

earnings stocks in order to feed the voracious appetite for the symbols of our potency, to be somebody.

So what does it mean for understanding our own mental health? Our awareness of this drive in our daily lives to be somebody, better than you, through our outward displays of wealth, power, physical beauty, and “cool” is an essential part of why we get up every day. These *instinctual drives* provide the energy that motivates us to go out there to make the money we use to buy our signs to others of our place in the sun. We *sublimate* our *instinctual* needs for status in any one of a number of human created institutions that allow us to attempt to satisfy the desires of our *id*.

We are competitive, we are ambitious, of course some more so than others. For many their daily lives are one of constant battle, their nighttime lives ones of *anxiety* dreams expressing these primal needs.

How far can it go? I was on a visit to New York and while walking through an art museum with a hard-driving investment banking buddy, another man walked by us. My friend said to me in a state of real anger: “Did you see that, the buttons on his jacket sleeve?” I confessed ignorance and he explained how in a high-end custom made suit (I guess as compared with a low-end custom made suit) the buttons at the end of the sleeve are not sewn on as in off-the-rack clothes but come through real button holes and this fellow had some of the buttons unbuttoned. My friend was sure that the unbuttoned buttons were on purpose to flaunt how expensive the suit was. If my friend were not so well socialized he would have confronted this other man and held up his own real buttonholed sleeve. That is what really separates humans from animals, the ability to *sublimate*, in this case into a verbal attack to someone else, these animalistic drives into highly socialized behaviors.

Imagine the suit-wearers psyche. Imagine my friend’s psyche. At their level of playing the dominance hierarchy game they are down to noticing the buttons at the end of a suit

jacket's sleeve as a sign of just who we are—better than you. Tough way to live. A lot of stress, a lot of high blood pressure, a lot of frustration and anger internalized.

It was during this time in my life that I was recently retired and was working away on my first book, *The Animal Within Us: Lessons About Life From Our Animal Ancestors*. At dinner after the museum tour I brought up the animal's dominance hierarchy and got into a conversation about chimps, evolutionary survival, animal dominance and how so much of our behavior, although performed in a highly intellectualized form, when its outer layers are peeled back, at its core we find patterns of behavior identical to our nearest animal ancestors, the chimpanzee.

These events and our subsequent conversations became incredibly important for me. My friend often commented about how these ideas at times helped him to understand not just his own, but the behaviors of others with whom he did business as well as personal relationships. Could he stop his own ambition and competitiveness, no, genes are a force of Mother Nature, but did understanding it help him, yes. Instead of jerking him around by a chain around his neck, and causing him much psychological turmoil, at least an awareness of his true motivations helped him to manage his own life more effectively and took the edge off the psychic torment it caused him. In part, this experience, and others like his helped me to decide I have something to offer in terms of providing this toolkit of ideas from the world of behavioral science that would allow others to lead a better life.