

Why You Do What You Do: How The Founding Fathers, Not Freud, Got It Right

You and many others may be using a very primitive model to understand yourself and not even know it. People for thousands of years have used character traits to explain why people do what they do, especially attributing good or evil to any behavior. If the person is obedient and compliant, they are good. If they challenge the status quo, they are labeled as discontents that are bad and possibly evil. If they are accomplished, they are good. If they can't compete, they are lazy, weak, and have no self-control. They may even be stupid and incompetent.

This assignment of traits can go from bad to worse. If they get angry, they are being aggressive and may do harm to people. If somebody hurts another, they are selfish and not trustworthy. If they abuse alcohol, drugs or sex, they are displaying a self-destructive trait. People often use the term, self-sabotage, to explain repeated actions that appear to be self-defeating.

In fact, most of the patients I treat start by believing they are self-destructive and that something is wrong with them. They come to see me because all their own efforts to change their traits have not worked and they have run out of options. Few realize that the problem is that they don't understand what is wrong with them, and have unfairly blamed themselves and their character for the problem.

My ability to help people change begins with providing a different explanation for why you do what you do. Based on my 65,000 hours of treating people in my practice as a clinical psychologist, I believe that character traits don't do justice to the complexity of human behavior. Character traits like selfish, weak, narcissistic and many others are too simplistic to explain the range of human behavior and don't provide an avenue to heal emotional distress. In fact, they make things worse because they blame you for the problem.

History of Self-Blame

Despite being destructive, this approach has much appeal to the common man because it has been used by authority figures for thousands of years. From the earliest of times, people have been taught that man is either good or bad. The Ten Commandments are one of the earliest codes of conduct that are based on character traits. Follow the rules and you are good. Break the rules and you are bad.

Early Christian theologians expanded the good-evil construct to introduce the idea of sin (bad/evil) and virtues (good) into the Seven Deadly Sins and their inverse, the Seven Virtues. Sin was based on your animal nature. Sex and aggression were animal instincts and the basis for sin. These must be overcome for man to develop a high moral character. A premium is placed on control over one's thoughts and feelings.

Emotions lead to sin and self-denial leads to virtue. People must use their rational minds to control their impulses. There is lust as a sin, and chastity as the virtue. Gluttony is paired with temperance. Charity stands in opposition to greed. Diligence is contrasted with sloth. Patience is paired with wrath. Kindness is the antidote for envy, and pride is linked to humility. Each of these virtues or character traits is enhanced through good works, penance, and prayer.

In simple terms, there are simple rules to follow to be good: don't get mad, show no interest in sex, eat as little as possible, don't want anything, work all the time, don't be selfish, and don't feel good about anything you do. If you can't control your impulses and emotions, your moral character is weak and you have nobody to blame but yourself.

This belief system has far-reaching social and political significance. If man's basic nature is self-destructive, then the common man needs to have leaders who prevent the emergence of their basic nature. If mankind fears those own impulses, they will turn to authority figures to tell them what to do. Throughout the ages, kings and religious leaders have used this approach to maintain control over the masses, building immense power and wealth to support their position.

An Alternative Movement

Fortunately for the common man, there have been others throughout history who have offered a different view of the nature of man. If man's basic nature can be trusted, then men have the right to govern themselves. The writing of the Magna Carta in the 12th century initiated a process to return power to the people and trust man's judgments. Several centuries later in England, these rights were enhanced and a law enacted, the Bill of Rights to ensure these rights. This movement to restore belief in the common man's reasoning led to the emergence in the 18th century of religions like Quakerism led by George Fox and philosophies like Scottish Pragmatism based on common sense promoted by John Witherspoon at Princeton University in America.

This movement came to a head at the time of the American Revolution. While it may be different to think of the Founding Fathers as philosophers rather than statesman, their political rebellion rested upon this alternative philosophy of man. The Founding Fathers relied on the arguments of Thomas Jefferson, the American statesman and philosopher who wrote about natural reason and natural rights as the basis for self-determination.

In the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Jefferson wrote: "...we hold these truths to be self-evident." Self-evident implies that people have innate knowledge and can judge if something feels right or wrong. They don't need a king, a religious leader or any higher authority to tell them what to do or what rules to follow. People were considered capable of sound reasoning and judgment and rejected the idea that people were inherently self-destructive. Being an American meant that you trusted your own judgment, embraced freedom and equality for all, and as an individual "... had inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

Freud Went Backwards

Belief in the nature of man took a step backward with the introduction of psychoanalysis in Austria at the beginning of the 20th century. Dr. Sigmund Freud, a neurologist by training, developed an elaborate theory of the mind that was adopted as the primary framework to explain human behavior. Freud's writings were impressive, introducing concepts like the unconscious and psychological defenses to protect the mind from the potential overload from sexual and aggressive instincts. Being a medical doctor, the medical establishment adopted his theory and it became the framework to understand mental disorders throughout the world, and continues to be the primary influence that guides mental health treatment to this day.

Freud's concepts were in direct contrast to the earlier American philosophy about the nature of man. Freud believed that mankind had a death instinct, called Thanatos, that caused people to be self-destructive. People created character structures in their minds to hold back the forces of aggression, sex, and self-destruction. Anti-social behavior occurred when those structures broke down and man acted on his animal instincts.

Freud's theories were easy to believe because Freud now provided a scientific explanation that was consistent with the earlier Judeo-Christian beliefs about the nature of man. Freud's concept of the Id that was driven by animal instincts was no different than the concept of sin. Both approaches were based on the same belief that man was inherently self-destructive. They

differed in the approach to change, with religious leaders preaching penance and prayer and Freud offering his psychoanalytic treatment as the basis to treat mental illness.

The Founding Fathers, Not Freud, Got It Right

By the middle of the 20th century, you had two emerging philosophies about the nature of man that created two distinct and separate psychologies. There was the European model of Freudian psychology based on man being self-destructive, and an American psychology based on man using survival instincts as the basis for their choices.

In this emerging American psychology, the release of emotional tension drives people's behavior. Emotions are the most powerful forces in your life and you act to reduce emotional tension. You are an emotional being who happens to think, not a thinking being who happens to feel. The unconscious is not the scary portion of the mind where self-destructive tendencies lurk. It is a place where you hide your natural emotions that may threaten your connections to significant others in your life.

If you use fear as an example, fear causes people to avoid and run away. That does not make them lazy or weak. It makes them scared. They avoid as a way to reduce fear. The same is true with depression. If depression can be understood as anger turned against the self, then self-blame is a way to misdirect anger and avoid conflict.

This new American psychology flips traditional psychology on its head. People are now trustworthy in that people do things for reasons that make sense to them. If you can understand the emotions that drive the person, you can make sense of why they do what they do and solve the relationship problem that is causing the emotional reactions.

The Two Selves

The same holds true about people's understanding of themselves. Emotions come from two sources in the mind. People have innate knowledge based on the experience of what feels good and what feels bad. This knowledge is experienced through the emotions of joy, sadness, and anger. These emotions form the basis for your authentic self. When these emotions are your driver, you are honoring your authentic self.

There is a second source of emotions that can often be stronger and overwhelm your authentic emotions. These emotions result from the way you were raised by your family. Because you are born dependent on your parents for survival, the rules that you learn from your parents are vital. Your emotions tag those rules, so you feel fear if you are even thinking of breaking a rule or guilt and shame if you break the rules. Since all parents are imperfect, the rules they teach are imperfect. This means that you are trained to feel guilty or ashamed for reasonable acts that are only unreasonable to your parents.

Because of the fear of being abandoned or separated from your parents, the guilt and shame play loudly in your mind. They become the driver of much of your behavior. This means that every time you act to reduce fear, guilt or shame, your family and your past is still influencing you. In fact, you may even merge your sense of self with your role, believing that you are acting true to yourself when you are actually being excessively influenced by your past and not being true to yourself. I call this self, the self for others because it is driven by the need to please others and requires you to disconnect from your authentic reactions.

Treating Identity Confusion

In many cases, the person I'm treating cannot tell me the emotions behind their actions. They can tell me what they say to themselves, and often confuse their thoughts with their feelings. They suffer from identity confusion where the self for others is thought to be their authentic self. Without the ability to read their emotions, they easily confuse learned emotions with authentic emotions. In fact, many actually experience high levels of anxiety when the natural emotions get stirred because they may have to face disappointing others to do what feels right to them. For example, some people feel anxious when they are getting angry. They do not recognize or experience rising anger but report only feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

Treatment focuses on recognizing hidden emotions and overriding the anxiety that comes with emotional honesty. The person faces corrective emotional experiences where the worst fears aren't realized and the person learns to honor their authentic reactions. They learn the difference between who they are and the way they were taught, and feel stronger with each act of emotional honesty. They learn to trust themselves, just as our Founding Fathers believed, and live the American dream.

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