

Proposal for an evolutionary synergy linking self-consciousness to anxiety management

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Abstract

Representing oneself as an existing entity and having intense fear of the unknown are human specificities. Self-consciousness and anxiety states are characteristics of our human minds. We propose that these two characteristics share a common evolutionary history during which they acted in synergy for the build-up of our human minds. We present that perspective by using an evolutionary scenario for self-consciousness in which anxiety management plays a key role. Such evolutionary background can introduce new relations between philosophy of mind and psychology. The proposed evolutionary scenario starts at the Pan-Homo split time (about 6my ago) when our pre-human ancestors were able to manage representations while also being able to partly identify with their conspecifics. These identifications allowed our ancestors to merge the representations they had of parts of themselves with the corresponding representations they had of their conspecifics. The scenario proposes that such merger has led our ancestors to progressively build up a representation of their own entity as existing in the environment, like conspecifics were represented as existing. This evolutionary process is considered in the scenario as the source of an ancestral form of self-consciousness. The same process has also produced identifications with suffering or endangered conspecifics which have created in the minds of our ancestors some new anxieties coming in addition to the animal ones. The resulting psychological sufferings had to be limited for evolution to continue. The tools developed to that end by our ancestors (caring, collaboration, communication, ToM, ...) have also procured significant evolutionary benefits with positive feedbacks on identifications. Overall, the evolutionary scenario proposes that the combination of the anxiety management processes with the evolution toward self-consciousness has created an evolutionary engine that has accelerated the coming up of our human self-consciousness. As a result, our today human minds contain important anxieties interwoven with an evolutionary nature of self-consciousness. Such perspective brings to consider that many of our mental states may be unconsciously guided by these evolutionary sourced anxieties (which are still to be clearly understood). Corresponding anxiety management processes are then key contributors to our human feelings and motivations, and to our interpersonal relationship. For instance, the role of Pascalian type diversions can be understood as keeping consciousness away from psychological sufferings produced by too anxious mental states. Also, part of our human sexuality developed during human evolution can be considered as a multidimensional escape and refuge from anxiety. This also brings to look at our psychological well-being and to our mental health as much more related to anxiety management than assumed so far. Dis-functioning of anxiety management processes can then be source of mental disorders and illnesses. The evolutionary scenario proposes that avoidances of too anxious mental states can even lead to evil behaviors. These subjects need more developments. Possible continuations are introduced.

Keywords

Self-consciousness, Identification with others, Anxiety management, Ancestral anxiety, Evolution, Evolutionary engine, Mental health, Human sexuality, Mental suffering