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EXPERIENCING MOTIVATION: TWELVE PROPOSITIONS FROM REVERSAL THEORY

There are two related assumptions which are widespread in psychological theories of motivation and personality. The first is the assumption of **homeostasis**. This is that for a given motivational variable (e.g. drive, arousal), there is a single optimal level of that variable which the individual strives at all times to achieve. The second assumption is that of **consistency**. This is that all important aspects of personality remain reasonably constant for a given person - or at least, for that person in a given type of situation. Most major theories of motivation are based on the first of these assumptions, and most major theories of personality on the second. The most immediately obvious way in which reversal theory differs from previous theories of motivation and personality is that, as will become clear in what follows, **it denies both of these assumptions**. As a consequence, human experience and behaviour are seen from the reversal theory perspective as being more complex and varied than appears to be allowed for in most psychological theories.

Although reversal theory itself is therefore necessarily rather complex, it is possible to indicate some of the main lines of the theory in a reasonably concise way by means of a set of twelve propositions. These now follow. Although it will not be possible in such a brief presentation to bring out the full range of psychological phenomena which can be explained in terms of these propositions (this will be done in Apter, in press), other papers in this edition of *SELF AND SOCIETY* will at least indicate how they may throw light on a diversity of apparently unrelated problems. In turn, it will not need much imagination on the part of the reader to see how the application of these principles may be further extended to account for a wide range of non-clinical as well as clinical phenomena, and David Fontana's paper in particular points the reader in this direction.

1. **The same behaviour may be performed in association with quite different, even opposite, phenomenological states.** (By phenomenological state here is meant 'type of experience' or 'state of mind').

For example, one person may punch another in a state of mind which is playful or alternatively in a state of mind which is genuinely aggressive. Although an aggressive punch will typically be stronger than a playful one, and although the nature of the action may well be indicated by means of additional cues (e.g. facial expression), it is perfectly possible for exactly the same action to be performed in either of these states of mind. An important corollary of this is that given clinical symptoms may be associated with different mental states in different people, or in the same person at different times.

The implication of this proposition is that any full understanding of behaviour must necessarily make reference to the phenomenological level.

2. **An important aspect of a person's phenomenological state at a given time is the way she experiences her own motivation.** This will be exemplified in later propositions. It is necessary here, however, to bring out the fact that reversal theory analyses this experience into two levels. The first of these is the level of content: the particular goal which individuals see themselves to be pursuing, the physiological sensations (e.g. of arousal) which they experience in the course of this pursuit, and so on. The second level is that of the way in which this content is interpreted by the individual. This second level is therefore a 'higher' or 'meta' level with respect to the first, since it takes the first level as its subject matter and then deals with it in different ways. These different ways appear to be limited in number and each represents what may be termed a '**meta-motivational state**'. A meta-motivational state therefore is an identifiable type of phenomenological state associated with a particular way of interpreting the content of experience in relation to motivation. Just as different types of experience may underlie the same action (proposition 1), so different types of interpretation may underlie the same contents of experience; for example, the sensation of physiological arousal may be interpreted, and in this sense experienced, in different ways.

3. **There are two alternative ways of experiencing the relationship between goals and means.** In the first of these the goal is central in experience, and the rest of experience, including the means to the goal, is in some sense more peripheral, and organised around it. In the second, the activity which constitutes the means is central in experience, the goal if there is one, being peripheral and no more than an excuse for the activity. In other words, in the first case the goal is the 'figure' in the phenomenal field, the activity merging into the 'ground', in the second case the activity is the 'figure' and any goals there may be merge into the 'ground'. An example should help to make this point clearer. Suppose one is cooking a meal for a friend. One may experience this either in a goal-oriented or an activity-oriented way. In the first case, for example, one may see oneself to be pursuing the overriding goal of pleasing one's friend - and indeed, if one thought of a better way of doing this than by cooking a meal, then this particular activity may well be replaced by this better way. In the second case, the cooking itself is primary and undertaken because it is enjoyable in itself; the fact that a friend may enjoy the end-product is really an excuse for the activity, or a bonus - and if the friend could not after all turn up to eat the meal, one would carry on with the cooking anyway. It cannot be said that either of these ways of structuring experience is intrinsically 'better' than the other, and each has its own types of satisfaction as well as its own types of dissatisfaction.

4. **There are two alternative ways of experiencing temporal aspects of motivation.** One of these may be described as present-oriented, the individual tending to focus on what is happening at the present moment. Only immediate goals are recognised and behaviour tends to be rather spontaneous. The other may be described as future-oriented, the individual centering his attention on long-term goals and monitoring his progress towards them. This typically involves a great deal of planning-ahead, so that current goals are seen as subgoals on the way to more important overriding goals which will be attained at some future time.

For example, while going for a walk one may be aware of only the relatively short-term goal of getting home in time for tea, and one may spontaneously decide to do something else if it seems at that moment to be more interesting. On the other hand, if one is walking to work and it is necessary to be punctual, then one is likely to see this current goal as being a subgoal towards the more important long-term goals of keeping one's job, getting promotion, earning more money, and so on. In this frame of mind one is more likely to want to plan what one is doing in order to ensure its success, and one is less likely to be diverted by passing fancies.

5. **There are two alternative ways of experiencing arousal.** In one of these ways low arousal is felt to be pleasant and high arousal unpleasant; in the other the opposite is the case - high arousal is felt as pleasant and low arousal unpleasant. In other words, in one state the individual attempts to attain and maintain a low level of arousal, while in the other he does the opposite, attempting to achieve and maintain a high level of arousal. This particular proposition brings out particularly clearly the way in which reversal theory differs from homeostatic theories of motivation, since in the latter there is only one level of a variable (such as arousal) which the individual is supposed to try to achieve. There are two different levels in reversal theory, which is therefore based on the idea of **bistability** rather than homeostasis.

According to the reversal theory view, then, there should be four qualitatively different ways of experiencing arousal. In fact, the English language already provides a word to describe each of these. Pleasant high arousal is 'excitement', while unpleasant high arousal is 'anxiety'; pleasant low arousal is 'relaxation', while unpleasant low arousal is 'boredom'. So in one state, depending on level of arousal, one experiences either boredom or excitement; in the other state, depending on level of arousal, one experiences either relaxation or anxiety. For example, in having an argument

with someone one may feel bored and be deliberately provocative in order to get some excitement out of the situation. Alternatively, one may feel threatened by the argument and anxious; in this case one will attempt to win it and get it over as soon as possible in order to achieve relaxation.

6. **The phenomenological states identified in propositions 3, 4 and 5 tend to go together.** That is, when an overriding goal is central in experience, there tends to be a preference to plan ahead towards its attainment; to the extent to which arousal rises, which it is likely to do if problems arise in the attainment of the goal, then this arousal will be likely to be felt as anxiety. Achieving the goal will normally be experienced as relaxation. On the other hand, if the ongoing activity is central in experience, then the perceived time scale tends to be shorter and the activity more spontaneous; high arousal is now likely to be felt as excitement and failure to achieve high arousal as boredom.

Following the definition introduced in discussing proposition two, the states identified in propositions 3, 4 and 5 are meta-motivational states. What the present proposition says is that these tend to be combined into more complex meta-motivational states. The more complex state which is characterised by goal-orientation, and which tends to be associated with a preference for planning ahead and for low arousal is called the **telic state**. The state which is characterised by activity-orientation, and which tends to be associated with spontaneity and a preference for high arousal is called the **paratelic state**. In these terms the individual is seen as being at all times either in the serious telic state or in the more playful paratelic state.

7. **There are two alternative ways of experiencing one's behaviour in relation to external pressure.** One of these is to experience one's activity as undertaken in conformity with some external pressure, the other to experience it as undertaken in defiance of an external pressure. Since these two states concern the interpretation of one's own motives, they are clearly meta-motivational states. The former is called the **conformist**

state and the latter the **negativistic state**. For example, when one votes in an election one can at a given moment in the course of voting see oneself as either voting **for** one candidate or **against** the other. It is often the case, as in this example, that acting against one force logically implies acting in conformity with another. In terms of experience, however, one of these predominates, being at the focus of attention, the other forming part of the background at the moment in question.

The negativistic and conformist states are independent of the telic and paratelic states, and either of the former may occur in conjunction with either of the latter.

8. **It is always possible to switch from one way of experiencing one's motivation to the opposite way, even in the course of the same action.** In other words, it is always possible to switch between the telic and paratelic and between the negativistic and conformist meta-motivational states if the appropriate inducing conditions occur. Such switches are referred to in the theory as **reversals**, and this term highlights the fact that the switches occur between **opposite** modes of interpretation of experience. The central role which this phenomenon plays in the explanations of reversal theory is of course reflected in the name of the theory itself. There is a sense in which such reversals are rather like the figure-ground reversals of perception, but now the figure is the focus of the whole phenomenal field, including conception as well as perception, and the ground is likewise the ground of the whole phenomenal field.

Clearly reversals of this kind can occur when one moves from one kind of situation to another, for example when one gets home from work and puts on the television. But they can also occur during the course of a particular co-ordinated sequence of actions. Consider, as an example, what happens when one gives a paper at a conference.

During the hours before giving the presentation one is likely to be in the telic state, the goal of succeeding being experienced as of primary importance, everything else merging

into the background. If it is still possible to plan ahead in some way (e.g. looking up references to make sure one has the relevant facts at ones fingertips), then one does so. And as one thinks of the event ahead, and the various things that could go wrong, one tends to experience anxiety. At some stage, however, a reversal usually occurs into the paratelic state. This may be just before giving the paper, during the course of giving it, or immediately afterwards. Whenever it occurs, the arousal then becomes enjoyable in itself, and there may even be a degree of spontaneity about behaviour if circumstances permit. (Of course some people will switch between these states a number of times as they build up to, and then give, the paper).

Reversals may be induced by a number of different factors (e.g. threats, social cues, etc.). But an important factor is that of **satiation**: having been in one state for long enough, even in the absence of other precipitating factors, a reversal will occur 'spontaneously'. (A good analogy here is that of sleeping/waking: having been asleep long enough, one will wake up even in the absence of alarm clocks, daylight entering the room, etc.). So there may be said to be an inherent fluctuation between opposite meta-motivational states.

This proposition brings out particularly clearly the reversal theory emphasis on inconsistency rather than consistency.

9. **Individuals may have biases towards one way of experiencing motivation rather than its opposite.** That is, although most people will be expected to experience both members of a pair of meta-motivational states at different times, nevertheless people also have biases towards one state rather than the other and therefore, other things being equal, they will tend to spend longer periods of time in that state than the other. This is referred to in the theory as **dominance**. For example, a given individual may be conformist or negativistic dominant to some extent or another.

As far as telic or paratelic dominance is concerned, it is assumed (following proposition 6) that, generally speaking, there will be a tendency for someone who is highly telic dominant, i.e. goal-oriented (and in this sense 'serious-minded'), also to prefer planning ahead and to attempt to avoid high

arousal. Similarly, for someone who is low in telic dominance (which is the same as saying 'high in paratelic dominance'), there will be a tendency not only to be oriented towards activity for its own sake (playfulness) but also to prefer to be spontaneous and to attempt to achieve high levels of arousal. A personality scale (The Telic Dominance Scale, or TDS) has now been developed to measure these tendencies, and consists of three subscales, one measuring 'seriousmindedness', one 'planning orientation' and one 'arousal avoidance'. Scores on these subscales, as expected, do in fact correlate with each other to a significant extent (Murgatroyd et al, 1978).

10. **It is possible for changes of various kinds to occur within the experience of a given meta-motivational state.** For example, it is obviously possible for the content of experience to change in some significant way without the state itself changing. Thus in the telic state a new goal may supervene and take precedence over the goal that was previously being pursued; or in the negativistic state a new salient source of pressure may become the focus for the negativism. These kinds of changes of content in focus of the phenomenal field are sometimes referred to as '**displacements**' in reversal theory.

Another, and more subtle, kind of change is also possible: these are changes in the nature of the state itself. For example, in the paratelic state the level of arousal which someone may need to experience, before the arousal is felt to be adequately exciting, may itself change. Such changes in the nature of the state itself are referred to as '**shifts**',

11. **Even 'unpleasant' emotions may be enjoyed if one is in the state of mind which finds high arousal to be pleasant.** Putting this in another way, any emotion which involves high arousal will, in the paratelic state, be felt to have some excitement component - even such emotions as anger, horror, grief and fear - and such emotions will therefore be enjoyed in

this state. The 'catch' is that emotions such as these are difficult to experience in the paratelic state because they are normally associated with the telic state. However, if it is possible to put a kind of 'paratelic frame' around them, they can then be experienced in the paratelic state. What this 'frame' does is to give them a kind of 'as if' quality: although the 'flavour' of the emotion remains the same, the genuinely threatening quality is removed. Emotions experienced in this way are called **parapathic emotions**. For example, a wide range of high arousal emotions, including horror and fear, may be felt while watching a 'horror film', and they will all be enjoyed in their parapathic forms provided the spectator continues to remain aware of the fictional nature of the situation.

12. **Some identities may be experienced as having contradictory qualities at a given time, and whether this is unpleasant or not will depend on the meta-motivational state prevailing.** By 'identity' here is meant a person, object, place or situation. When an identity is perceived in this dissonant way, the identity is said in reversal theory to be experienced as a synergy. For example, a painting, in a sense, has contradictory qualities: it both is and is not what it purports to be. On the one hand it is a scene of some kind, on the other it is no more than paint on canvas. Or again, a pun says two things at the same time. Both of these are therefore synergies. In fact, synergies are ubiquitous in experience. They do not need to be **logical** contradictions, and in the example of the painting the different qualities occur in relation to different 'perspectives'; but **experientially** the bringing together of such opposites is an essential part of the aesthetic experience of the painting.

Synergies of whatever kind usually have some special phenomenal quality, a kind of liveliness or vividness over and above the particular qualities which enter into them. But whether this special quality is enjoyed or disliked depends on the meta-motivational state. In the telic state the tendency is to treat them as unpleasant incongruities, ambiguities, dissonances, etc. and avoid them. In the paratelic state,

on the other hand, they are enjoyed and sought out. Fortunately, many types of synergy (e.g. those involved in figurative art and in humour) seem to help to induce the paratelic state in which they can then be enjoyed.

References

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PERSONAL CRISES AND REVERSALS

Introduction

Personal crises are of many kinds and may be triggered by many different kinds of events. Some of these events are externally imposed upon the person. For example, a person who suffers a loss or bereavement through a motor accident, a person who experiences rape or a woman made redundant because of the bankruptcy of the firm for which she worked - all may experience a crisis but have no real control over the onset of that experience. Other crises result from some feature of the person themselves. For example, periods of lethargy, feelings of depersonalisation or sexual impotency seem often to be due to some feature of the person's own psychology. In fact, most crisis events and experiences involve the interaction of these personal and environmental factors. In particular, the different reactions of people to the same environmental factor (e.g. some see redundancy as a crisis, others see it as a liberation) and the different reactions of the same people to grossly similar events occurring at different times clearly illuminate this person: environment relationship.