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The Scorpion And The Frog: A False Narrative Of Human Nature

Karen Silverman & Jaret Kanarek

The Scorpion and the Frog is an age-old fable, having taken various forms over the past centuries.¹ In the story, a scorpion asks a frog to carry him across a river. The frog is hesitant to agree because the scorpion might sting him on the trip. The scorpion assures the frog that he would not do that because it would cause himself to drown. The frog agrees, yet midway through the trip, the scorpion stings the frog anyway. When the frog asks the scorpion why, he replies that it is in his nature.

Like all fables, there is a moral to the story that is meant to be applicable to man's life. The moral of *The Scorpion and The Frog*, as it is generally interpreted, is that there are certain irrepressible instincts that man is helpless against.

The first problem with this moral is that the story from which it is derived is not analogous to man's nature. Man is born *tabula rasa*, meaning his mind is a blank slate, absent of automatic knowledge. Unlike other animals, man is a volitional being; he is able to make choices that determine the course of his life. He does not have preset instincts that force him to react in a specified manner to the given stimulus of the moment. Man is equipped with organs that receive sensations but he must use his faculty of reason to apply such vital information to his life. He may have automatic perceptual level sensations and functions, but his knowledge is not automatic. Man achieves knowledge through cognitive reasoning, which acts as a filter to whatever seemingly innate desires he may experience. He may feel sensations and emotions whether he wants to or not, but he will always have the ability to choose whether or not to act on said feelings.

The moral of the story implies that man has innate instincts, but man does not possess such faculties. Take for instance the most highly cited example of a human instinct, "fight or flight." In situations of danger, the

1 There are many versions of this story, but they only differ in the species of the main characters and not in the main moral and events of the story. Aesop's version, *The Farmer and the Viper* is a very famous variant of *The Scorpion and the Frog*.

fight or flight instinct supposedly kicks in forcing someone to either fight or flee from a perceived threat. For example, an approaching bus seems to elicit an automatic response in a man to jump out of the way. His heart starts racing, he starts sweating, his movements and breathing quickens. This, however, is not sufficient evidence for the existence of innate instincts.

What is critical is to understand why the bus elicits this reaction. The answer can be found in the fact that all men automatize knowledge over the course of their life. This automatized knowledge becomes a fundamental part of his very reasoning, no matter how lightening-quick it may be. In the case of the rapidly approaching bus, there is a whole range of automatized knowledge that the man implicitly utilizes. In the most abstract, he must have at least operational knowledge of the natural laws; he must know that his life is not immutable, that he values his life, and under which specific conditions his life is threatened. More concretely, he must know what the bus could do to him should it collide with him, that he will most likely die, et cetera. His knowledge of all of these facts is what enables him to identify the bus as a threat to him and choose to move out of the way to save his life. The fact that these value judgments happen at lightning quick speeds does not mean that the process does not exist at all. It certainly does not give reason to believe that his actions were dictated by an inherent nature.

Automatized knowledge is not granted to men automatically, however. Knowledge must first be held consciously before it can be automatized. Take for example the process of learning to type. When people first learn to type, they must consciously think about where each key is, which finger to strike it with, et cetera. In building the knowledge necessary to type, typing is slow and remains a fully (and painfully) conscious experience. Through enough experience and practice that knowledge eventually becomes automatized. This same process occurs with learning a language, learning to walk or play sports, et cetera. On the surface, they all seem to be almost instinctual once they have become mastered. Just as it would be foolish to claim that typing is instinctual because of the seemingly unthinking and quick way in which it is performed, so too would it be to call instinctual a man jumping out of the way of an oncoming bus.

Concluding the discussion of the oncoming bus, there is one final element that must be addressed. That is, the presence of the seemingly

biological reactions such as an elevated heart rate. Such phenomena are reactions to stimuli, whether perceived or imagined. It is not just the presence of stimuli, but also the fact that they are encompassed by either automatic or consciously held value judgments. Fast moving buses alone do not trigger intense anxiety, nor do objects of any kind moving toward or near a person. Additionally, happiness, fear, anxiety, and the like, do not float around in men's minds and bodies striking at random. Man is biologically built with the capacity of emotion, but what he feels emotions toward and for, and in what contexts, is a result of his chosen values. In essence, "there can be no causeless love or any sort of causeless emotion. An emotion is a response to a fact of reality, an estimate dictated by your standards."² Thus, in the case of the oncoming bus the fact of reality is that a bus is approaching a man's body at a fast rate. It is man's evaluation of that bus as a threat to his life—something he wishes to protect—that causes him to jump out of the way. When he sees the oncoming bus, his heart rate increases, his palms sweat, and so on, because he has judged the situation as threatening to his life, causing him sheer terror and anxiety worthy enough to trigger such a biological reaction. The same thing occurs when a man sweats, shakes or stutters when he is nervous, except the bus example demonstrates it as an incredibly sped up process.

How about the idea of basic survival instincts? There is a good reason that we protect babies from the dangers of sharp objects, fire, and pills that look like candy. They have no concept of these dangers because they have never had the experience to understand them. One might argue that babies develop protective instincts later on. However, there is no scientific or rational reason as to why these instincts kick in later rather than sooner. Such a notion is to simply equate learning to a matter of waiting for ones instincts to kick in. There is no science to support these claims, and that is all they are: claims without warrants.

Those who regard the moral of this story to be analogous to "human nature" are accepting and promoting the idea that man has no control over his actions. They are accepting the idea that human volition is subordinate to innate human instinct. Yet, there is another factor of *The Scorpion and the Frog* that needs to be fettered out. In the story, it is not just any type of arbitrary action being described; it is an action with evil intent. Thus,

2 Ayn Rand, "Galt's Speech," *For the New Intellectual*, page 147.

the deeper message not only makes a claim about man's nature, but places a value judgment on the very nature it describes. That is, it is not just any nature but an inherently *evil* nature that he cannot control.

Such a proposition is the secular equivalent of Original Sin, which holds man is *inherently* sinful by the very fact that he is born as man. In other words, he is guilty by his nature. To accept such a notion has dangerous consequences. Man's volitional nature is readily discarded, excluding choice and therefore free will. The epistemic consequences upon any rational man who truly accepts the notion that his life is out of his control are fairly obvious. To say the least, he will feel a constant sense of powerlessness and inefficacy in the world around him. At worst, he may take the viewpoint to its logical extreme; acting however he pleases under the guise that he "just couldn't help it."

Many political philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli, Ayn Rand, and the founding fathers, recognized either explicitly or implicitly the deep relationship between man's nature and his governing structures. In the view at hand, man is guilty for merely existing, and as such, the ground is readily laid for the most intrusive forms of preventive law. If man is laden with irrepressible and irresponsible aspects of his nature that requires him to do bad things, then the question is not *if* he will act on his nature but *when*. This is a simplified version of preventive law's justification, and with it there is surely an undesirable political result to follow, at least for those who desire the protection of their individual rights. As Ayn Rand put it, "the legal hallmark of a dictatorship [is] *preventative law*—the concept that man is guilty until he is proved innocent by the permissive rubber stamp of a commissar or a Gauleiter."³

Perhaps the true moral of this tale is that unlike the scorpion, man is not like the rest of the animal kingdom—he is the *rational* animal and has free will. The excuse, "It's in my nature, I couldn't help it" is not a valid one. It is time to drop the notion of innately ordained behavior and instead make rational choices based on the facts of reality. We can and do choose, and we are responsible for our actions.

3 "Who Will Protect Us From Our Protectors?" *The Objectivist Newsletter*, May 1962, page 20.