Panksepp on Emotions

While working on a degree in psychology, and suffering considerable chagrin at the emphasis on statistical behaviorism, I have found other material that is objective, scientific, and fascinating without the outrageous vulnerabilities or the political and ethical *dubiums* of experimenting, or imagining one can experiment, on people's subjectivity.

Jaak Panksepp is a researcher in psychology. His strongest interest is in finding a solution for depression, and you can listen to his TED talk, which offers an extremely powerful key to a central issue in psychology, the concept of emotion.

He has discovered seven specific "circuits" in the brain, corresponding to seven emotional paths. These emotions cross species not only through all the mammals, but crossing into birds and reptiles. They are brain functions, and his work is interesting because the definition of emotion in psychology is completely unsettled and this contributes to the chaos of behavioral research. Tying the definition of emotion to something objective would therefore be an achievement of the first order. He has seven specific trains of activation in the brain, and there is associated chemistry as well.

Perhaps the best traditional definition of emotion is "energy in motion." Emotion is what motivates us to act, and without emotion we would, ignorant and indifferent, subside into the dust. In fact, people whose lives are emotionally blunted in various ways are at risk of losing those lives, one way or another: to suicide at one end, or to one of the various diseases of indifference.

But much as I like the energy definition, it is mushy. So let us proceed to Panksepp, who makes it stand up straight. Let me list his seven and explain something of how I perceive them.

1: Seeking is the first: curiosity: the impulse to explore and find the next piece. When you are thinking of emotions in terms of love and hate, seeking is an unexpected intruder, but it does activate us and motivate us, so that is enough. We readily accept desire as an emotion, and seeking is an expression of desire. In Panksepp's system, as you will see, various kinds of emotion are separated, and this is based on things that happen in the brain: trains of activation are distinguished, circuits, pathways of response that are so specific they can be activated by electrodes.

2: Play is an emotion; the impulse to play is another specific circuit, and while its path lies near others because the brain is only so large, play has its distinct path. You can activate it and make people (or rats) laugh. Obviously play, and the desire for play, is a motivator. The significance of its being a circuit is that if you are on another circuit, say, depression (below), activating the play circuit can pull you off. We have all experienced this, of course, giving toys to sad children. Play can also sidetrack your studies… For all the delight we take in learning, play is a different circuit.

We commonly think of joy and happiness as emotions. Either of them would dispose us to become playful.

3: Care, originally in the sense of maternal care, is another specific circuit. While it is common to both sexes and all ages, the key to understanding it is the place of maternity in life and motivation. This is important, because care is then a *completely distinct circuit* from another circuit that is often called love.

4: Lust is the name Panksepp gives to the circuit involved in sexual feelings and emotions. This is significant in case you had some inclination to think that tenderness naturally slides into sexual feelings or that sexual expression is the deepest kind of loving care. Not at all. It is a different circuit. A woman who senses that a guy has shifted gears from tenderness to lust is noticing something real and specific.

5: Fear is always recognized as the emotional response to – the energy mobilization against — danger. But notice that, since the circuits are specific, a certain level of fear can be controlled by stepping onto another circuit. The person who takes an interest in bugs and spiders may thus overcome his entomological fear. In general, the deliberate activation of one of the other circuits has the potential to interrupt fear and even bring freedom from its mental lock-up. Very important, because fear that is out of control can prevent us from taking precisely the action we need to take.

6: Panic is different from fear. Its key is the young mammal's loss of its mother, and its extension is depression. It's really very different from fear. Put it this way: fear of abandonment is different from fear of tigers. That's easy! Notice, however, that play and curiosity are natural antidotes to depression (or panic) because they move you onto a different circuit, and apparently you don't wander around on two circuits at once. Panksepp's research has borne some fruit in noticing that one of the chemical adjuncts of the play circuit can be used to interrupt depression. It's in trials now, GLX13, and it seems to be effective and without side effects. Meantime, try a joke book.

Notice that panic and depression are not merely lack of joy. If anything, they are responses to lack of care; but it's not a lack of a circuit; it's another path. Again, it can be interrupted.

7: Anger, of course – everyone recognizes anger as energy in motion.

Apropos, however, one more note: anger, fear, and panic are catabolic. That is, while they have important functions in moving us forward in certain kinds of situations, they hinder digestion and break down the body in various ways. You get the energy to respond to an abandonment or to an unjust, scary, or imminently threatening situation partly by taking it from other places. Precisely so, while these negative emotions have an important role in human life, they are not possible as a way of life; ultimately they need to be countered or they will weaken and even kill you. There are (at least) three ways to counter them: curiosity, play, and tenderness. Oftentimes, sex is also used, but that is temporary and brings other vulnerabilities.