

What's Your Theory of Human Behavior?

Recently I have been challenged with the theory of human behavior which says that every human being acts or reacts in a manner that is in his or her own best interest. This theory believes that people choose their behaviors based on the likelihood that the particular behavior they choose will benefit them. People choose to go to college because it benefits them (although not immediately). People marry rather than forever cohabit because they believe marriage is more beneficial. A husband washes all of the dishes before his wife comes home from ladies night out because he believes it will be more beneficial to him if he does. People even give to charities not simply because it benefits others but, perhaps primarily, because it benefits them. It raises their self-esteem. It makes them feel like they have done something meaningful and purposeful. In reality it was more an act of selfishness than it was selflessness. In short this theory believes that to be human is to act out of one's own self-interest, which also can benefit others but only as a byproduct of the original premeditated action.

To a certain extent I must agree. Human behavior is largely dictated by one's own self interest. If something will not at some point benefit us (emotionally, physically, spiritually) then we are not likely to engage in that behavior. Even drug addicts, although their behavior by no means benefits them in the long run, use drugs because it brings some desirable benefits now. No one ever drank themselves to oblivion because they didn't want to. There may have been a part of them which fought against the desire to drink, but the drink was chosen because they did, at least to some degree, want to drink. It was desirable. They therefore acted out of their own self-interest.

Consider an odd example of this: A grown woman chooses to remain in an abusive relationship year after year. She drives home from work every night wondering what bombshell will erupt at home causing her to have to call in sick from work once again. She repeatedly refuses to remove her children from the home, call the police, issue a restraining order or otherwise move out. Her extended family finally cuts her off because she never takes the sound advice given her. Why does she continue in her passive behavior? Is it because she does not want to bring harm to her husband? Maybe a little. Is it because she actually believes it is in her children's best interest to remain in the home? Doubtful. She continues in a seemingly unbearable situation because in her mind it is in *her* own best interest. It is more comfortable you see to keep the waterbed still than to make waves. Being a "divorcee" is not a title she wants. She doubts she can ever find a man any better than the one she has anyway. In reality she fears for her life if she ever exposed her husband's sin or brought harm to him. Her behavior is really motivated by a warped sense of what she believes is in her own best interest. Staying will be, in her mind, better than the alternatives.

If, according to this theory, to be human is to act out of one's own self-interest, then what do we make of a person who never acted out of his own self-interest? If to be human is to be innately selfish then what of the person who never was selfish? Is that person still human? Superhuman? Just weird? What do we do with the person who always acted out of the interest of someone else? What do we do with Jesus anyway?

Let's take two events of Jesus' life for example. In John's gospel there is the story of Jesus feeding 5,000+ people with *"five small barley loaves and two small fish"* (John 6:9). Jesus' disciples took this measly tray of food (probably only enough to feed 2 small families) from a young boy, gave it to Jesus to bless and then redistributed the food to the crowd *"as much as they wanted"* (v.11). The leftovers amounted to more than they started with.

Having seen this miracle firsthand the crowd intended to take Jesus by force to make Him king (see Jn.6:15). By all accounts being adored by a group of 5,000 people so much so that they would want to make you king is something desirable for anyone. It was definitely in Jesus' best interest to allow this inauguration to continue. Who knows what benefits could be afforded a man with this level of power. Instead, *"...when Jesus perceived that they were about to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone"* (Jn.6:15).

Contrast this story with the story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. When Jesus stood before Pilate to be questioned about all the accusations being made about Him, Pilate asked Jesus, *"Are You the king of the Jews?"* (Mt.27:11), to which Jesus replied *"It is as you say."* (Mt.27:11). Huh? 3 Months ago when it would have benefitted Jesus, to a level we could only dream of, to accept the kingship being offered Him, He refuses it and removes Himself from the scene. Now, when it would be undoubtedly in His best interest to refuse kingship, to deny all the claims about Him, to depart to some middle eastern country yet to be discovered and sip pina-colattas till the sky goes pink, Jesus says, 'Yes I am the king of the Jews' and refuses to defend Himself! If being human is to be innately selfish then what do we make of this guy? We should understandably react like Pilate and *"marvel greatly"* (Mt.27:14) at this behavior!

There is a sense in which human beings are innately selfish and will forever act out of their own best interest. But the call for every Christian is to be more than that- more than human. The call of every Christian is to become super-human. It is to be what Jesus was. It is to be like Jesus. It is to take the behaviors which benefit us and ask of them, *"Do they benefit my Creator?"* When we do this we will inevitably encounter situations where our chosen behaviors will not benefit ourselves at all. It is then that we, by the power of God's Spirit within us, arise to become more than human. For the goal of Christianity, you see, is not heaven, peace, eternal happiness or the "good life". The goal of Christianity is to act out of the interest of Someone wholly other and be willing to face the sometimes hurtful consequences thereof.

"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

May you, by the power of God's Spirit in you, continue to morph into the likeness of Jesus.

In Christian love,

Shaun