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In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. An instinctive behavior is an action in an organism that is performed by all members of their species. They are typically a fixed action pattern (FAP) that occurs as a result of a specific stimulus. Instinctive behaviors are innate abilities - they occur and are present from birth onward and are not learned behaviors. Reflexes are an example of instinctive behaviors. For birds, nest building, migration, and imprinting (automatically following mothers) are all instinctive behaviors. Maternal instincts are also instinctive behaviors. © slowmotiongli—iStock/Getty ImagesBehaviour patterns regarded as instinctive range from simple reflexes to complex sequences of actions covering extended amounts of time. Occurrence can be spontaneous or selective in response to external stimuli. For example, the territorial defense behaviour of three-spined sticklebacks and of European robins can be triggered by simple patches of red, despite the fact that these animals have visual capacities comparable to that of humans. Selective responsiveness can sometimes lead to "miscarriages" of performance. For example, Tinbergen observed sticklebacks aggressively displaying to a red postal van 30 metres (100 feet) away, visible to the fish through a window. It has also been reported that a cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) responded to the gaping of goldfish by regurgitating food to them as though the fish were the cardinal's own chicks. Experiments have shown that nature can sometimes be improved upon when it comes to the stimuli evoking or guiding instinctive behaviour. For example, a nesting herring gull or oystercatcher that is offered a choice between its own clutch of eggs and a dummy egg five times the size of a real egg will select the dummy egg, even though the bird cannot sit on the egg in the normal way. In a similar example, a black-headed gull will choose a clutch of five eggs in preference to its own clutch of three, with comparable results. Such artifacts are known as supernormal stimuli. However, the kind of responsiveness they reveal has sometimes been exploited in nature, as in the case of cuckoo chicks, whose large size relative to its parasitized hosts' own chicks elicits more than the usual amount of provisioning behaviour. A frequently cited example from the simpler end of the range of instinctive behaviour is the food-begging behaviour of newly hatched herring gull chicks. Hungry chicks peck repeatedly at the tip of a parent's bill until the parent gull regurgitates food. When satiated, the chicks cease pecking until the need for food arises anew. Experiments by Tinbergen and others demonstrated that the red spot at the end of the adult gull's bill stimulates and guides a chick's pecking and that the degree of contrast between the spot and the rest of the bill, as well as the thinness of the bill and the way in which it is moved, also contribute to the strength of the response. Indeed, Tinbergen found that a thin red rod with three white rings near its tip produced a stronger response than a real gull's bill, thus constituting a supernormal stimulus. However, experience can change stimulus selectivity if response to suboptimal stimuli is rewarded with food. In addition, the form of the food-begging behaviour undergoes subtle modification, including a shift in the target from the tip to the base of the parent's bill, as the chick ages. European toad© Ern/FotoliaEven more fixed in form and sensory selectivity is the prey-catching ability of frogs and toads. A hungry animal positions itself where insects or worms are likely to occur and responds to the appearance of these organisms by approach and orientation movements until the object in view is centred in the visual field and close enough to be caught. This triggers tongue-flicking, which is a ballistic response—once released, it runs its course without possibility of adjustment should the prey make a move. The prey-catching ability of frogs and toads has been studied from both behavioral and neurophysiological perspectives. These studies have shown that prey catching is guided and culminated by "bug-detector" cells in the visual system, in which neurons are tuned to moving spots that cross the retinal areas from which the neurons receive input. In the 1980s German neurophysiologist Jörg-Peter Ewert elegantly traced pattern recognition and motor command circuitry and determined how these two systems interface in the brain to effect prey detection and capture in the toad *Bufo bufo*. Ewert also determined that there is minimal involvement of experience or environmental input in the ontogenetic assembly (origin and development) of this mechanism. It is a model of what the term instinct generally denotes. Another example of behaviour based on predetermined mechanisms is the nest hygiene behaviour of the honeybee. When a bee dies in a hive, a worker bee who discovers the corpse will pick it up and carry it outside, essentially throwing it away. While this appears to be an intelligent response to the possibility of contamination in the hive, it is in fact a blindly programmed reaction to the presence of a chemical, oleic acid, exuded by dead bees. Dabbing a live bee with this substance results in its being treated as though it were dead. In the case of dead larvae in hive cells, genetic study has shown that the hygienic behaviour depends on two genes on different chromosomes. One gene affects behaviour associated with uncapping of the hive cell, and the other gene affects behaviour associated with the removal of dead bodies. Of such functionally adaptive behaviour it might be said that instinct masquerades as intellect. This observation is impressively illustrated by hive-building behaviour in bees. Hive construction is emergent from a number of simple reactions constrained by the geometry of the spaces within which the insects work. Not so amenable to reductive explanation are the vastly more elaborate structures fabricated by ants and termites. For example, in northern Australia there is a species of termite that builds an insect version of a skyscraper—a slab-sided tower 15 feet (4.6 metres) high and about 10 feet (3 metres) wide, oriented so as to catch morning and afternoon sunlight in lieu of central heating. Because of the north-south orientation, this creature is called the magnetic termite, which is only partly apt, since geomagnetism is not involved in the aligning of the building as a whole, though it does guide the insects' construction of the galleries and chambers in pitch darkness inside the structure. Still more astounding as an engineering marvel is the nest of the bellicose termite (named for the ferociousness of its soldier caste). These insects cultivate fungus gardens within the nest, which serve to process the dead wood upon which they feed. But the fungi generate heat and also affect the air quality by absorbing oxygen and releasing carbon dioxide. To keep conditions within the limits required for optimal fungal growth and for the well-being of the termite inhabitants, there is an air-conditioning system consisting of an underground basement containing an elaborate arrangement of cooling vanes connected by flues to the various compartments above. Such intricate functional design would seem to imply the existence of an overseeing architect or central planner. But there is no evidence of any single locus of intelligence or governing agency; only the myriad scurrying termites, each going about its own narrowly limited and apparently mindless business. To try to account for functional transcendence of this sort, it has been proposed that the whole colony of individual animals constitutes a supra-organism, by analogy with the way in which the cells of a multicellular body constitute an integrated individual. However, it is not understood how such wonders of instinct are achieved. mandrillRuss Kinne/Photo ResearchersProminent among the more spectacular examples of behaviour patterns regarded as instinctive are many that serve the function of communication, especially in contexts having to do with competition for reproductive success. Communication behaviour consists of visual, acoustic, chemical, tactile, and electrical signaling, through which one animal can influence the behaviour of another, usually of the same species. Visual and acoustic signals have received the most attention from ethologists, since these signals are the most salient to human perception. Display postures and movements occur in bizarre forms and sequences, especially in animals with advanced perceptual capacities, such as arthropods, cephalopods, and vertebrates. In many cases, behavioral evolution has been complemented by morphological change that enhances the conspicuousness and flamboyance of choreographed movements. Such morphological influences are seen in the tail of the peacock, the plume of the bird-of-paradise, and the gaudy faces of male mandrills. When performance and panoply join in extravagant displays—such as the water-skimming pas de deux of courting western grebes, the ceremonial covorting of courting whooping cranes, and the sequence of sexual overtures that constitutes male courtship in guppies—explanation in terms of functional significance is far from obvious. For Darwin, such behaviour and show posed a challenge to explanation in terms of natural selection. They appeared to exacerbate vulnerability to predation by being conspicuous and by hampering movement. His answer, in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), was "sexual selection"—enhancement of reproductive success as a consequence of behaviour that includes conspicuous courtship displays. This comes in two forms: (1) competition between members of one sex for access to the other sex, which favours anything that promotes fighting ability, including size, strength, possession of weapons of offense and defense, and effective threat displays, and (2) mate choice, in which one sex exercises discrimination in forming sexual partnerships with members of the opposite sex. It is the latter that is invoked to account for the evolution of courtship, which can be explained by two theories. According to the "good genes" hypothesis, the choosing sex (which is usually the female) selects a mate on the basis of indications of genetic quality, which the displays of courtship are assumed to manifest. One version of this argues that the degree to which the displays constitute an impediment to predator avoidance advertises superior staying power, meaning the animal survives despite the hindrance or handicap, and thus it is to be preferred over less-constrained competitors. The other theory, sometimes called the "runaway hypothesis," is that perceptual preferences of the choosers, for certain characteristics unrelated to genetic quality in prospective mates, can drive the evolutionary exaggeration of those characteristics to greater and greater extremes. For example, the existence of supernormal stimulation supports the idea that displays of exaggerated posture or movement that show abnormally bright or enlarged patches of colour could be favoured, thereby increasing the exaggerated representation from one generation to the next. At the same time, choosers that prefer to mate with partners possessing supernormal characteristics will be more likely to produce supernormal offspring relative to their less-discriminating competition. Thus, instinctive preference and supernormality will drive each other to evolutionary extremes, in a runaway fashion, until called to a halt by other, counterbalancing forces of natural selection. © CorbisIn addition to sexual selection, there are other ways in which courtship behaviour can have functional consequences affecting evolution. For example, the physiologically arousing effects of courtship behaviour can help to synchronize the reproductive states of mating animals, hence contributing to the coordination and timing of their joint enterprise. Another important function may be prevention of miscegenation, especially where closely related species coexist. Hybrid matings can be wasteful of reproductive effort, and means to avoid them have repeatedly evolved where their occurrence is a possibility. Courtship is one mechanism by which hybrid mating can be avoided, because it provides the members of one species with a way of discriminating between their own kind and members of a related species. Consistent with this are the numerous instances of "character displacement"—greater differences in the characteristics of form and behaviour between two species in regions where they overlap (sympatry) compared with regions where they live separately (allopatry). This applies to the signals involved in the early stages of pair formation. While species-specific form and behaviour can provide for recognition among conspecifics, there are cases of exploitation of such recognition by outsiders. A famous example is the case of the "femmes fatales" among fireflies. Flashes of light by male fireflies serve as mating signals that draw the attention of females. The flash patterns are species-specific, and a female responding to a male of the same species does so by flashing in reply at a precise interval after the male's flash. However, females of the predatory firefly genus *Photuris* can mimic the replies of females of the genus *Photinus*. Thus, the predatory females lure *Photinus* males within striking distance and so obtain a meal. This kind of interspecies deceptive signaling is known as "code breaking." There also exists "blind" deceit; for example, orchids of the genus *Ophrys* have flowers mimicking the shape, colour, and sex pheromones of certain species of wasps. The plants trick male wasps into trying to copulate with the flowers, and thus they coerce the wasps into serving as pollen transporters. © Kojo Tanaka, Animals AnimalsThe relative rigidity and species distinctness of behaviour that is regarded as instinctive has sometimes been found to be sufficient to serve taxonomic purposes. Lorenz emphasized this aspect of instinct, claiming that behaviour can be regarded in the same light as morphology in terms of judging phylogenetic relationship. His own studies of the behaviour of ducks exemplified the degree to which the distribution of variety in behavioral characteristics could correlate with taxonomic affinity. Indeed, behaviour has on occasion been found to surpass anatomy for the taxonomist. In the first issue of the journal *Behaviour* (1948), a paper described the use of nest-provisioning behaviour by digger wasps to distinguish between species, which were later found to have only subtle morphological differences. In fact, as early as 1778, three European warblers—the willow warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), the chiffchaff (*P. collybita*), and the wood warbler (*P. sibilatrix*), all of which are virtually identical in appearance—were distinguished on the basis of their very different songs by English naturalist and clergyman Gilbert White. Although song acquisition in songbirds involves learning of some sort in most species, it is learning that is usually constrained to the point that there is no great distortion to regarding the behaviour as instinctive, unless the focus of interest is on development. caribouU.S. Fish and Wildlife ServiceInstinct construed as behaviour is often taken to include large-scale and composite activities, such as migration, mating, and parental care. This categorization may serve as a loose way of conveying that these kinds of behaviours can be viewed as part of the biology of a species, but it is no ally of precision. It tends to conflate Tinbergen's four questions of animal behaviour: motivational causation, ontogenetic development, adaptive function, and evolutionary provenance. As a consequence, behavioral scientists, if they use the word instinct at all, generally restrict its application to more specific patterns of behaviour.Colin Beer

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