

# Behaviourism is a kind of cruelty

Young people need meaning not simplicities

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Emma cuts. Maria swears. Liam takes drugs. Jamie fights and is doing his best to get expelled from school. Another boy refuses to leave his bedroom. One girl is starving herself and another has been caught shoplifting.

These behaviours are all ways of dealing with life, ways of coping with anxieties of one sort or another. Whatever the cost, and however personally or socially destructive they may be, they make sense to the young people involved and, for a time, they work, at least until the young person finds an alternative way of trying to make the anxieties go away. Because when Emma cuts, she feels relieved. When Maria swears, she feels more powerful. When Liam takes drugs he feels more alive, and so on....

When we respond *only* to the presenting behaviour, attempting to moderate or change it into something less destructive, the danger is that we ignore what's underneath. Because the real reason why Emma cuts is because her parents are splitting up and she has no other outlet for her anger. The reason why Maria swears (although she'd never admit it) is because no one wants to go out with her. The reason why Liam takes drugs is because they give him back the confidence that his abuser took away from him. And so on....

Of course we want to support young people. Their unhappiness upsets and scares us. It makes us feel useless and somehow culpable. But in our panic we've developed a whole behavioural industry based on achieving measurable goals whereby we decide on the outcome we want and then work backwards, plotting tangible measures that will lead to the behavioural change we deem necessary.

This appeals immensely to young people like Emma, Maria, Liam, Jamie and the others, anxious about the most important things in life, things that aren't quantifiable and can't be empirically proven: "What am I worth? Am I loved? Am I like other people? What's going to happen in the future? Why do bad things happen?" Young people are forever searching for answers to these questions, for proof, for whatever will make the anxieties go away, and simplistic behaviourism pretends to put young people out of their misery. "You'll find happiness if you work hard.... You'll be loved if you become rich.... Your future will be secure if you get a good job.... Bad things won't happen if you do as you're told and follow the rules...."

Beneath their behaviours, all young people – indeed, all *people* - are searching for meaning in their lives, meaning that they hope will leave them feeling more worthwhile, loved, connected to other people, safe; meaning that explains why we're on this planet and why we have to die.

I used to teach poetry to young people who were always demanding to know what poems meant, as if they were trying to decode secret messages. "Well, it might be this," I'd answer, "it might be that, or it might be something else...."

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“Yes, but what’s the right meaning?” they’d invariably ask. “What do *you* think?”

Their search for meaning was as insistent as it was reductive, and my job was to join them in their searching, dissuading them from reducing everything to whatever could be empirically proven.

“But sir, when the poem says this, it must mean that!”

“Why must it mean that?”

“Well it’s obvious,” they’d say, “or else what’s the point?”

“What’s the point?” is the most important question a young person can ever ask. And the most important answer might be “I’m not sure, but that’s an excellent question! We might never find the answer but we’re all asking the same question, so let’s keep thinking about it together....”

We do young people no favours when, in our desire to help, we suggest to them that simply changing their behaviour will be an answer to life’s problems, or that controlling their behaviour will ever be a substitute for finding meaning in their lives. Of course no one wants young people or anyone else to suffer unnecessarily, but before putting a behavioural sticking plaster on an existential wound, we first have to prepare the wound: we have to understand how it came to be and why it hurts so much. Otherwise the sticking plaster comes off straightaway and things only get worse.

Emma, Maria, Liam, Jamie and all the others will be offered strategies, behavioural programmes for how they might do things differently. They’ll listen. They’ll wish that life could be so simple, and then they’ll carry on chaotically trying to find their own answers, “What am I worth? Am I loved? Am I like other people? What’s going to happen in the future? Why do bad things happen?”