

CHAPTER DISCUSSION PROMPTS

THE ANIMAL IN THE MIRROR: How To Manage Your Anxiety & Find Greater Inner Peace

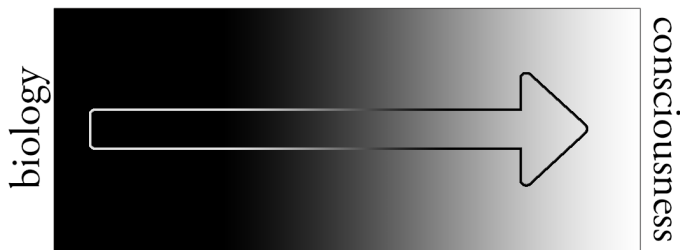
 **Book Club Zoom Visit:**

I am happy to drop by your book club meeting via zoom.
If you are interested, contact me through my website at www.arniebenn.com.
(I will try to accommodate all requests.)

LEVEL 0: INTRO

Chapter 00: The Animal In The Author

1. **Personal Reflection:** How does understanding the author's own journey with recognizing the "animal" within shape your expectations for the book? Have you had similar moments of self-awareness?
2. **Author Motivation:** Why do you think the author chose to begin by examining themselves first? What does it mean when an author acknowledges their own struggles with the concepts they're presenting? Does this make the material more or less convincing to you?
3. **Starting Point:** Before diving into the theory, what parts of your own behavior do you suspect might be driven more by survival instinct than by conscious choice?



LEVEL 1: ANIMAL

Chapter 01: The Animal In The Mirror

1. **The Central Metaphor:** When you look in the mirror, do you see the “animal” the author describes? What specific behaviors or reactions in yourself might qualify as “animal” rather than “human?”
2. **Fear and Survival:** The author argues that much of our behavior stems from survival instinct and fear of death. Can you identify a recent decision or reaction that might have been rooted in this primal fear?
3. **Spectrum of Consciousness:** Discuss the gradient from “purely biological” to “purely conscious” motivation. Where do you place yourself on this spectrum in different areas of your life?
4. **Resistance to the Concept:** What’s your immediate emotional reaction to being compared to an animal? Is there resistance? If so, where might that resistance be coming from?
5. **Evolution vs. Programming:** If we accept that we’re “programmed” by evolution, does that diminish human achievement, or does it make our conscious choices even more remarkable?

Chapter 02: Applying The Concept

1. **Daily Recognition:** After learning the core concept, what everyday situations can you now view through the lens of “animal vs. conscious choice?” Share specific examples.
2. **Trigger Moments:** Can you identify moments where you’ve caught yourself reacting instinctively rather than responding consciously? What happened, and what might a more conscious response have looked like?
3. **Self-Observation Practice:** How difficult is it to observe your own behavior objectively while it’s happening? What gets in the way?
4. **Group Dynamics:** How does the concept apply to group behavior? Can you see the “animal” operating at a collective level in your workplace, family, or community?

Chapter 03: Resisting The Concept

1. **Cognitive Dissonance:** Have you noticed yourself resisting ideas in this book? What specific points create discomfort, and why might that be?
2. **Ego Protection:** The author suggests we resist uncomfortable truths to protect our ego. Can you identify times when you’ve rejected information that challenged your self-image?
3. **Comfort vs. Growth:** What’s at stake if you fully accept the “animal in the mirror” concept? What might you change about how you see yourself?
4. **Validity of Resistance:** Are there parts of the author’s argument that you think deserve skepticism? How do you distinguish between healthy critical thinking and ego-defensive resistance?

LEVEL 2: HUMAN

Chapter 04: Happiness, Depression & Substance (Ab)use

1. **Pleasure vs. Happiness:** How does the author distinguish between animal pleasure-seeking and conscious happiness? Do you agree with this distinction?
2. **Substance Use as Symptom:** If addiction and substance abuse are attempts to soothe the inner animal's fear and discomfort, what does that suggest about treatment approaches?
3. **Depression's Roots:** Consider the author's perspective on depression. How much of what we call depression might be the animal's response to modern life rather than a purely chemical imbalance?
4. **Personal Happiness:** Where in your life are you seeking pleasure vs. cultivating genuine happiness? What's the difference in practice?
5. **Increasing Happiness:** The author suggests that decreasing fear leads to increasing happiness. Do you agree with this, in theory? Can you see applications of it in your own life?

Chapter 05: Psychology & Accountability

1. **Nature vs. Nurture Revisited:** How does the concept of the "inner animal" interact with psychological theories about childhood development and trauma? (See Appendix A.1.)
2. **Personal Responsibility:** If much of our behavior is driven by biological programming, where does personal accountability begin? Can you be held responsible for your animal reactions?
3. **Therapy's Role:** How might therapy be seen as a tool for strengthening conscious control over the animal? Share examples if you have experience with therapy.
4. **MacArthur I and II:** The author suggests approaches to help us grow, both alone and with the help of others. Did you find any of these strategies useful? Do you already do any?

Chapter 06: Religion & Spirituality

1. **Religion vs. Spirituality:** Do you agree with the author's distinction between religion and spirituality? To what extent do you think the two are inseparable?
2. **Sin and Instinct:** If "sin," in religious terms, is often the animal acting unchecked or out of fear, does this framework make religious moral teachings more or less relevant?
3. **Imagining Spirituality:** What do we see in our minds when we say the words "spirituality" or "soul?" What is the relationship between spirituality and "higher consciousness?"
4. **Spiritual Practice:** What spiritual practices (meditation, prayer, contemplation) might specifically help in developing conscious control over instinctive reactions?
5. **Higher Power:** How does the author's concept relate to the idea of surrendering to a "higher power?" Is consciousness itself a kind of higher power within us, or perhaps beyond? (See Part 3)
6. **Secular Spirituality:** For those without religious beliefs, what does "spiritual" growth look like in the context of consciously evolving beyond our animal programming?

Chapter 07: Sexuality

1. **Biological Imperative:** How does viewing sexual desire as primarily an animal drive change (or not change) how you think about sexuality and relationships?
2. **Modern Yet Primitive:** The author discusses how our sexual instincts derive from animal programming, not reason. What specific modern sexual challenges might this help explain?
3. **Conscious Choice:** What does mature, conscious sexual behavior look like versus animal-driven sexuality? Where is the line?
4. **Cultural Sexual Norms:** How much of what we consider “normal” sexual behavior is actually just rationalized animal instinct versus conscious choice?
5. **Sexual Dysfunction:** The author suggests that men and women are equally instinctive, when it comes to sexuality; it simply manifests in different ways that can both be equally dysfunctional. Do you agree with this contention? Can motivations be equally dysfunctional even if outcomes are not equally dangerous?

Chapter 08: Relationships & Marriage

1. **Attraction vs. Partnership:** How does distinguishing between animal attraction and conscious partnership change how you think about choosing a life partner?
2. **Expectations:** How might unrealistic relationship expectations stem from confusing animal chemistry with conscious compatibility?
3. **Conflict Patterns:** Can you identify “animal behaviors” that emerge during relationship conflicts? What would a more conscious approach to disagreement look like?
4. **Long-term Success:** If the initial spark is largely biological, what sustains a relationship when that fades? How does consciousness factor in?
5. **Advice:** What advice would you (who are married) give to a couple newly engaged that might best set their marriage up for happiness and success?

Chapter 09: Money

1. **Resource Hoarding:** How is our relationship with money shaped by our animal need to hoard resources for survival or to find comfort? Can you see this playing out in your own financial decisions?
2. **Enough:** The animal never feels it has “enough.” How can consciousness help determine what is actually sufficient?
3. **Consumption:** How much of consumer culture exploits our animal instincts rather than serving our conscious values?
4. **Control:** Is a widening gap between rich and poor proof that “the rich” controlling all money, or is it simply a consequence of human nature and opportunity?
5. **Financial Freedom:** What would a truly conscious relationship with money look like, free from instinctive fear and status-seeking?

Chapter 10: Politics

1. **Tribal Politics:** How does the author's framework explain political tribalism and polarization? Can you see the "animal" operating in your own political reactions?
2. **Neither Side Fully Right:** The author argues neither political side can be more than half right. What is your emotional reaction to this statement? Can you see the value in the other side's view?
3. **Policy vs. Identity:** When has your political opinion been driven more by group identity than by conscious analysis of actual policies? Would you do it differently in the future?
4. **Compromise:** Why is political compromise so difficult if both sides contain necessary truth? What animal instincts get in the way?
5. **Evolution in Politics:** What would a more evolved, conscious political discourse look like? What would you personally need to change to achieve it in your interactions?

Chapter 11: Science

1. **Science as Tool:** How does the author's view of science differ from "scientism" — the belief that science can answer all questions? Do you concur?
2. **Science and Meaning:** What questions fall outside the domain of science? How does consciousness or being relate to scientific materialism?
3. **Bias in Research:** The chapter discusses bias and fraud in scientific research. How does this challenge or confirm your trust in scientific institutions? Are scientists more or less susceptible to instinctive thinking than other groups?
4. **Certainty:** When does confidence in scientific consensus become dogma? How can we maintain healthy skepticism without falling into denialism?

Chapter 12: Animals

1. **Our Relationship:** If we are animals with consciousness, how should that shape our relationship with other animals?
2. **Suffering:** Does recognizing our own animal nature make us more or less sympathetic to animal suffering?
3. **Consumption:** Can we reconcile eating animals with the recognition that we share fundamental biological drives and capacities for suffering? Do you agree with Temple Grandin's quote about animal farming?
4. **Dominion vs. Stewardship:** What does conscious, evolved treatment of animals look like versus instinctive exploitation?

LEVEL 3: BEING

Chapter 13: Conscious Evolution: 3 Approaches

1. **Three Paths:** The author outlines three approaches to conscious evolution: science, religion, and “consciousness.” Which resonates most with you, and why?
2. **Practical Application:** How would you actually implement one of these approaches in your daily life? What specific practices or disciplines?
3. **Progress Measurement:** How can you tell if you’re actually evolving consciously versus just thinking you are?
4. **Obstacles:** What are the biggest barriers to sustained conscious evolution? What pulls you back toward more instinctive living or reactions?

Chapter 14: Consciousness Perspective — Part 1

1. **What Is Consciousness?:** After reading this far, how do you define consciousness? Has your understanding evolved?
2. **Observer and Observed:** Can you experience yourself as both the animal and the consciousness observing the animal? What does that feel like? What does it “think” like?
3. **Free Will Revisited:** If consciousness can observe and sometimes override the animal, does that constitute free will?
4. **Development:** Is consciousness something you develop, or something you uncover? Is there a difference?

Chapter 15: Consciousness Perspective — Part 2

1. **Expanded Awareness:** The chapter explores deeper aspects of consciousness. What new perspectives or connections did it spark for you?
2. **Altered States:** Have you experienced moments of heightened consciousness or awareness? How did they differ from ordinary experience? Do you (or are you able to) repeat them?
3. **Consciousness and Reality:** How does consciousness shape what we perceive as reality? Can two people live in fundamentally different realities based on their level of consciousness?
4. **Beyond the Individual:** Is consciousness purely individual, or is there a collective or universal aspect to it?
5. **Perspective:** Do you think we live in the world of our own perspective? Do you feel we have the power to craft that perspective, and therefore, our experience of the world and life? Does “the big picture” keep the “small pictures” in perspective for you?

Chapter 16: Purpose & Being

1. **Animal Purpose:** The animal's purpose is survival and reproduction. But what is the purpose of consciousness? What is your purpose?
2. **Being vs. Doing:** What does the author mean by "be-ing?" How is this different from just existing or from constantly doing?
3. **Meaning Making:** If we are animals with consciousness, where does meaning come from? Do we create it, discover it, or both?
4. **Death Reconsidered:** How does developing consciousness change your relationship with mortality — the very thing that drives the animal's fears and defines its whole world?
5. **Integration:** What does successfully integrating animal, human, and "being" look like in a lived life? Can you envision or describe this?
6. **Aspiration:** Does this journey bring you to change your personal aspirations or priorities in any way? Does it make increased happiness and inner peace seem more possible?
7. **Love:** What are practical ways that we can come from a place of greater love in our daily interactions? How can we engage in this spirit with those we do not feel loving towards?

Final Reflection Questions

For Last Meeting:

1. **Personal Transformation:** What is the single most impactful insight from this book for you personally?
2. **Behavioral Change:** Have you noticed any changes in your behavior or awareness since starting this book?
3. **Ongoing Practice:** What practices will you continue, to help strengthen consciousness over instinct in your mindset?
4. **Sharing the Concept:** How would you explain "the animal in the mirror" to someone who hasn't read the book?
5. **Next Steps:** Where do you go from here in your conscious evolution journey?

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