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Jewish Thought Extensions

Introduction

1. Introduction

I. Why people study Psychology

Jewish Thought Extension: Though all of Judaism involves a close connection and knowledge of the scientific world, that link is closest in regard to psychology, which discusses the science of human beings directly.

II. Schools of Thought

Jewish Thought Extension: Some schools of thought (such as Freudianism or Behaviorism) question the existence or role Free Will plays in choice and decision making. Thankfully, psychological research is moving away from those schools, but their shadow will impact our entire study.

III. Historical background

Jewish Thought Extension: The idea that humans “think” is not something that early human beings seemed to have been aware of. In Tanach, we find that Haman “Speaks in his heart,” which is how thought was first described: a verbal speech dialogue with the self.

2. Methods of psychology

I. Scientific method and special issues in psychological experimentation

Jewish Thought Extension: Occam’s Razor is a critical principle for all sciences. How does it relate to questions of proof-faith dilemmas in Judaism? How could it be used to discuss Creationism and the Big Bang? Or are their reasons why the scientific method cannot be used here?

II. Brain Monitoring

III. Ethics

Jewish Thought Extension: As religious Jews, the ethical standards by which researchers hold themselves should resonate for us as well. Not harming a patient/research-subject, and offering full transparency before and after are important values for us all.

Biological

3. Gross neuro-anatomy

I. Diagram of the brain and its parts

Jewish Thought Extension: Today, we understand thought is localized in the brain. However, many Jewish texts connect thought with the heart or even the kidneys. How do we understand those texts? Is it just poetic use of metaphor? Do they reflect the erroneous science of the times?

II. Sense of Touch and motor control (mapping)

II. Advance issues:

(a) Gender

Jewish Thought Extension: What is the effect of gender differences in brain function? If one gender tends to have relative strength on average in one area, should Judaism pursue separate gender roles? Or if differences are minimal, should religions eschew gender difference entirely?

(b) Lateralization

Jewish Thought Extension: Judaism discusses handedness in regard to the placement of the Tefillin. Current research stresses how handedness is non-binary, and the Jewish response literature takes a similar view (Rabbi Moshe Feinstein OC 4:11)

4. Micro neuro-anatomy

I. Parts and Systems of Neurons

II. Drugs and Brain Chemistry

Jewish Thought Extension: Drugs, Stimulants, and Depressants have a profound effect on brain chemistry and brain function. Judaism allows alcohol, though a Nazir avoids its effects. What would Judaism's view of marijuana be, in a state where marijuana is legal?

III. What makes a neuron fire an electric charge?

5. Sensation and perception

I. Duplicity Theory of Vision

Jewish Thought Extension: The Blind and the Deaf have special status in Judaism. Whereas in the Talmud the word "Deaf" meant someone who could not communicate at all (The "Deaf-mute"), the word "Blind" meant something similar to what it means today. Should the Blind be excluded from various Jewish practices (all Mitzvot? Blessings on Light? Sight?)

II. Color Vision and Color blindness

Jewish Thought Extension: Judaism requires special training in the differentiation of colors for Rabbis, and as per the effects of lighting on color, reading colors can only occur during the day. Should a color blind Jew be allowed to be a Rabbi?

III. Advanced issues in vision: (a) optic nerve, (b) distance, (c) form/ground

IV. Taste & smell

Jewish Thought Extension: Research has identified a certain percentage of the population as being super-tasters, with superior sense of taste. Shulchan Aruch and commentaries (YD 98) discuss whether determining the presence of non-Kosher taste should require a super-taster.

V. Hearing

Jewish Thought Extension: The cocktail party effect describes the inability to perceive two sounds at the same time (even if we hear both). The Talmud calls this "Trei Kalei Lo Mishtamai." We can focus our attention on one sound if we wish: this allows us to pay attention to a prayer leader at Kiddush or in synagogue despite their being noise in the background.

6.. Reflex and motivation

Jewish Thought Extension: Cuing is a critical part in goal-formation and the setting of a plan to achieve that goal. What parts of the Jewish tradition consist of cuing with the express purpose of making it easier to set and focus on goals?

Jewish Thought Extension: Religion and World Change. Research demonstrates a real human need to change/improve the world, but Silberman demonstrates that different Jews carry out this need to improve the world by latching on to different parts of religious teaching.

Cognition

7. Memory

I. Long Term Memory and three types of memory loss

Jewish Thought Extension: Judaism believes that “Honoring one’s parents” still applies even if the parent suffers from dementia. Is dementia in old age an opportunity to mend burnt bridges within a family? What if a family has grown apart?

II. Working Memory

III. Issues in memory: (a) central executive, (b) sleep & dreams, (c) amygdala

Jewish Thought Extension: A general take-home lesson from the unit on memory is how memories can be incomplete, and how memories already stored can influence the formation of new memories. Judaism’s view on testimony (requiring two witnesses, and rigorous examination) reflects an awareness of the problems of memory.

8. Learning

I. Schema: Accommodation and Assimilation

II. Conditioning: Classical and Operant

Jewish Thought Extension: See 1st unit, the idea of “programming” organisms complicates our view of Free Will. If Rewards and Punishments influence us so profoundly into becoming who we are, where does personal choice and culpability fit in?

III. Higher order types of learning

IV. Rewards and Punishments

Jewish Thought Extension: Judaism provides punishments for active violations of negative laws, but not for failure to perform positive commands, or for passive violation of negative laws; as is consistent with research on positive and negative Reinforcers and Punishments.

9. Thought, consciousness, and sense of self

I. Animal minds and Animal Thought

Jewish Thought Extension: Judaism distinguishes between human beings and animals. Why are human beings different? Does it relate to ability to engage in speech/symbolic thought? Abstract thought? Does it relate to perceptions of pain? How different are we from animals?

II. What makes us into “us”?

Jewish Thought Extension: Psychologists and Philosophers have considered the mind/body or soul/body dilemma for centuries. If the brain is part of the body, and it is a programmable/trainable part of the body (our personalities are nothing more than trained neural pathways) – then what is the soul? And what makes us into our unique selves?

10. Language

I. Two theories of language acquisition

Jewish Thought Extension: the Targum defines humanity as having the capacity to speak. Nativist Acquisition Theory also suggests strongly how language is part of being human and not just a technique that we happen to learn or be taught by those around us.

II. Developmental Stages of Language Acquisition

Jewish Thought Extension: Different languages operate differently, and the differences between Hebrew and English are worthy of note. Syllabification and phonology tends to be easier in Hebrew; but the absence of conjugation requirement makes English easier in some ways.

III. Second language learning

Jewish Thought Extension: Should Jewish subjects be studied in Hebrew or in the student's first language? Discussing the issue scientifically: how might this help Hebrew language acquisition? What are the costs of such an approach, in light of second language learning research?

IV. Language effect on cognition

Jewish Thought Extension: Were the colors different to the Jews who lived at the time of Tanach? How does language relate to perception of the world? Does the word "Teirutz" meaning answer and excuse in Hebrew effect the connection between answers and excuses?

11. Emotion

I. Two theories of emotion

Jewish Thought Extension: According to one major theory of emotion, the body produces very basic responses, and the brain determines what emotion to feel based on context. But if so, the experience of emotions is driven by the language of the individual. See Yona Chapter 4: are his emotions depression and elation? Yet, the language used is anger and joy.

II. Discussion of Specific emotions

Jewish Thought Extension: Depression is described as the sense of learned helplessness and the absence of hope. Religion plays a big role in responding to depression (and is emotion-focused and not problem-focused in nature). See Pargament, Science of Religion and Coping.

12. Decision Making and Behavioral Economics

I. Altruism and Aggression

Jewish Thought Extension: Researchers debate the question whether altruism is a natural human condition, or whether rational human beings are not altruistic. If altruism is antithetical to the natural human state of being, then religion's role in promoting it is more keenly understood.

II. Affection

Jewish Thought Extension: Physical attractiveness is not a predictor for long-term happiness in a relationship, as the psychological benefits of relationship are more important than attractiveness as measured on an objective scale. Does Judaism minimize physical attractiveness in dating? Is it a bigger-factor in the matchmaking world than the modern one?

III. Predicting the Future

Social

13. Social psychology

I. Schemas and Structures

II. Stereotypes and Group Evaluation

III. Norms and social conformity

Jewish Thought Extension: To what extent has Judaism operated as an open system where Jews chose how to live their lives, and to what extent do social norms and conformity play a role (see “cherem”)? Does the impact of norms and conformity change at different ages and life stages?

IV. Attitudes and Persuasion

Jewish Thought Extension: Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains how attitudes change to match behaviors instead of as a response to persuasion. How does understanding the process behind attitude change give a Jew in the formative years more control in their own attitude formation?

V. Group Process

14. Personality

I. Self-concept

Jewish Thought Extension: The Looking-Glass Self theory indicates that a big part of our self-concept is developed based on how others see us. The rules related to dress in Judaism relate heavily to self-concept, and also touch on the Looking Glass self concepts as well.

II. Personality Types

Jewish Thought Extension: The Cult of Culture versus the Cult of Character. Mainstream psychology does not say one personality type is “better” than any other, but the media often rates good and bad personalities. Where does Judaism stand on this question? We ask this question in particular regarding Introversions and Extroversions.

Summary/Capstone/Practical

15. Developmental psychology

I. Essential Questions

Jewish Thought Extension: There has been much discussion in the scientific literature of late of the role that our genes play in how we become who we are, how our potential is limited by our genetics. What are the religious implications of such a position, that potential is not fully open equally for all?

II. Biological Basis of Development

Jewish Thought Extension: Parenting styles (permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative) have been widely studied by psychologists. Does Judaism support one style over the other? “Measure for Measure” and the use of corporal punishment are discussed.

III. Cognitive Development

Jewish Thought Extension: Jean Piaget discusses stages of cognitive development, which parallels the stages of cognitive development found in Gittin (64b). Judaism sees development into adulthood in terms of stages that continue until age 20, and not as an either/or proposition at age 13.

IV. Psycho-social development

Jewish Thought Extension: Erik Erikson spoke about the stage of identity development in adolescence. When does that happen within Modern Orthodoxy today? How does the year in Israel play a role in identity development?

V. Moral Development

Jewish Thought Extension: Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development are not research based, and much recent research has evaluated the final stages of moral development and whether they are the pinnacle of development or not. Is post-conventional morality a good thing?

VI. Other issues

Jewish Thought Extension: The stages of grief dovetail well with the different stages in Jewish mourning: the paralysis and speechlessness of Aninut (denial), the intense emotion of the first three days of Shiva (anger), the remainder of Shiva, and then acceptance after mourning.

16. Abnormal psychology and Therapy

I. Defining Normal and ab-normal

II. Anxiety Disorders

Jewish Thought Extension: Religion masked OCD is a phenomenon wherein Mitzvot requiring detail in observance (Pesach, Mikvah) are used to justify OCD practices on the part of the patient. How should a therapist and/or rabbi relate to such a patient?

III. Mood Disorders

IV. Biological Disorders

Jewish Thought Extension: What does the status of shoteh mean in Judaism? The Talmudic description of Shoteh seems to match that of schizophrenia. What are the implications of the diagnosis for Jewish law? What about other disorders in Jewish law?