Aversive Situations: Challenge and Self-doubt

When a situation immediately creates fear, anxiety or distress, the logic of action becomes emotional. The first step is to ask oneself if it is possible to escape the situation, and, if that’s not possible, it must be faced. But even in the latter case, the resistance to obstruction is not unlimited and the actor could — under the influence of persistent factors — be discouraged and left unable to continue.

Living is an occupation. (Jean-Pierre Cassel)

1. The Preliminaries

When it no longer works, read the instructions. (popular saying)

In defining a situation, we define the problem to be resolved, the objective to be achieved and the result to be produced. The challenge is born from the emergence of a situation of choice, for all choice, without exception, is a challenge. What to do? What not to do? How to do it? Meeting the challenge causes entry into the emotional arena.

The concept of challenge can be defined, first of all, in relation to the concept of the problem. A challenge, as well as a problem, results from a discrepancy from the norm, but is differentiated on two points. Whereas the problem indicates a past situation, the challenge indicates the future.
The actor will try to react to resolve the problem and that is the challenge. Later, although the problem is external to the actor, the challenge includes a psychological dimension. A challenge can also be defined as the discrepancy between the “program” that comes from the actor’s internal environment and, we might say, the “plan” that comes from his external environment. The writer Bernard Montaud (1993) makes reference to an “invisible hand”, specifying that the challenging situation, a source of apprenticeship, is a part of the “plan”.

Researchers who want to simulate a problem for rats, create a system that includes the manipulation of a pedal that delivers a morsel of food. The rat learns to use the pedal and thus resolves his problem of nourishment. To simulate a challenge, and to put the animal in a situation of choice, the researchers electrified the pedal and the rat who wishes to eat learns that the feeding pedal provokes a electrical shock.

A simple telephone call can be a challenge, so much so that the person asks someone else to make that call in his stead. In the same way, answering the telephone can be such a challenge that many people leave the answering machine on, even while they are in, in order to screen the calls.

Responding to a job ad is often a very difficult challenge.

Looking someone in the eyes can be a challenge more difficult than skydiving.

A manager, even a high-level manager, can be incapable of having face-to-face meetings, choosing instead to put everything that he has to say in writing.

Having to go to a meeting the next day can demand an inordinate amount of energy and could prevent the actor from sleeping the night before.

Writing a memo that may “make waves” could require an uncommon amount of courage.

Asking for a pay raise, saying “no” to someone, speaking in public, could all be challenges as difficult as firing someone or imposing a prison sentence.

1.1 Challenge and competition

When I look at myself, I am worried; when I compare myself, I am reassured. (Sacha Guitry)