

CHAPTER TWO

GO FAST, LOOK GOOD, FEEL GREAT

Like sex, motorcycle riding is a lot more fun to do than to analyze. Under the microscope, everything we do for fun eventually winds up being just a bunch of chemical reactions, at least if we follow the trail of evidence about why we do what we do through the layers of interrelated causes and effects. This is more difficult than it may at first appear, because it

means asking questions about behavior that seems normal on its face. It requires us to adopt the outlook of Bill Cosby's Temple University philosophy-major girlfriend, who, he says, used to ask questions like "Why is there air?"¹⁹ In their primer for studying evolutionary psychology, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby cite the "twisted outlook" of cartoonist Gary Larson as a necessary way to combat the "instinct blindness" that makes any study of "natural competences"²⁰ so difficult. If a single Larson cartoon could summarize the enterprise, it would be the classic in which a cow in a fenced field, flanked by two other cows grazing nearby, is looking up with an angry expression. "Hey, wait a minute!" she exclaims. "This is grass! We've been eating grass!"

The way people react to this question can tell you a lot about their own assumptions. If they laugh, giggle or even smile, it is a good bet that they have a nicely tuned sense of the ridiculous and can extrapolate from the startled and angry cow's realization that what seems normal is just normal to someone because...well, why? Cows eat grass. They are 'designed' that way, and it does not matter whether you think they are equipped with their unique bovine way of life by God or evolution; they still eat grass and evidently like it. So when, in an "Aha!" moment, we put what she is doing into the context of the strange, we see how much of our own lives is ruled by the 'natural competences' with which we are equipped. Among them, the idea of fun itself—that it is a good rather than a bad thing to seek wherever we can find

it and will seek it in any way we can—including putting our bodies in motion on motorcycles.

To get beyond instinct blindness, we must examine the systems that make fun possible before we can even reach the “Aha!” That means we must understand, at a minimum, something of our own and the motorcycle’s anatomy and physiology, as well as the nature of the phenomena we encounter when straddling the bike. Even before we start the engine, we are in a psychobiological state of ‘arousal.’ That does not mean sexual arousal, but arousal of the autonomic nervous system that controls the heart, the lungs and all the systems configured by evolution to enable fight or flight.

Arousal tenses muscles, speeds up heart rate and breathing, releases endorphins and clotting agents into the bloodstream and triggers brain mechanisms that heighten the ability to focus on the task literally at hand. Which is a good thing, since aboard a motorcycle, you are about to light off a powerful engine and use it to launch yourself through space, often surrounded by other vehicles, any one of which can kill or maim you. Psychologist Peter Gray summarizes what has been learned by experiments about arousal states this way: “The usual finding is that high arousal is beneficial for tasks that require a good deal of physical energy, or where performance of the task is instinctive or very well practiced, but is often harmful for tasks that call for novel (unpracticed) movements, creativity, or careful judgment.”²¹

Neophytes obviously encounter the highest arousal states, since the whole affair is ‘novel’ and the movements necessary to make the bike do what the new rider wants it to

do are far from instinctive. New riders must learn the array of actions and effects that will soon become familiar and that will result in the optimal arousal state. Though psychologists disagree about how to define that 'optimal' state, for a motorcyclist the definition is simple: the optimal arousal state is the one that makes a ride fun.

This definition seems so obvious that it is just plain silly. But it is not, because the relationship between arousal and emotion is not well understood. 'Fun' is not an emotion but a summary and judgment we make of an activity that we find enjoyable in certain ways, even if it exhausts us mentally or physically. Thus can a motorcyclist plunge into a rainstorm on a dark, cold night, ride for two hours, and consider it fun. What can possibly make it so? The cultural view is that it derives from a sense of achievement, knowledge that one is doing what others cannot or will not, and conscious awareness of connections to nature that are unavailable to those who dare not. This might well be so; but behind these satisfactions are the physical stimuli that create the optimal level of system arousal, and the psychophysical responses to those stimuli. The same conditions that make the ride fun for one rider can make it terrifying for others, especially neophytes. Likewise, the rider's own physical and mental state obviously affect the fun-factor of the ride. But the primary fun generator, operating for all who seek moto-motion under any circumstances, is the set of stimuli acting on the rider that can vary in intensity, but not in type.

Stimuli (plural) and stimulus (singular) play such an important role in everything related to motorcycles in motion that it is worth considering carefully what the word 'stimulus'