

Week 1 Answer to Question 4
Step 2.3 Ask Mark

Question 4: Does the mind control us, or do we control the mind?

Well, for those of you who've been listening to what I've been saying in this week's lessons, what do you mean when you say "we" as opposed to "our minds"? We are our minds, so when you ask "do we control our minds or do our minds control us" the question is impossible to answer, in the terms that you've phrased it. But I think I know what you mean.

So if I do understand you correctly, this question relates somewhat - at least in part - to the previous question, to question 3, where we draw a distinction between the conscious and the unconscious parts of our minds. And I suspect that the questioner means, when they ask "do we control our minds", they mean "do we - the conscious part of our minds - control us - the unconscious part of our minds - or is it the other way around?" So there the question evolves into a slightly different question, because I think that the answer depends on which aspect of our mental functioning you're talking about. There are happy circumstances in which the conscious part of the mind controls the unconscious part of the mind in the sense that it has access to it and can update it in the light of new experiences.

But there are also parts of the unconscious mind - what Freud called the 'repressed' - which is an unconscious part of us which is no longer accessible to us, and not subject to updating. And there you have, in that part of our unconscious, we have ways of behaving that may not be in our own current best interests, and which feel as if they're controlling us, and that is the case - in those instances I would say the mind controls you, in other words that they're unconscious, automatized ways of behaving, which are stereotyped and which are not under your volitional control, and may not be in your own current best interests, but that happens anyway. So the answer, in that sense, is "Well, sometimes the one way around, sometimes the other way around."

We must remember that the reason why we have an unconscious mind, the reason why we automatise much of what we do, is because that's the efficient way of proceeding. You can't constantly reinvent the wheel, you can't constantly have to re-decide absolutely everything -

how shall I walk, how shall I talk, you know, how shall I ride the bicycle? - you know, these things once they've been learnt, they don't need to be considered endlessly, consciously. And so we automatise them. So we're very happy for that part of our unconscious mind to control us in the sense that it's doing our bidding, and not bothering us. It's only the automatised part of the mind that's working against what the conscious part of the mind wants at any point in time that bothers us. And that's what the whole of the psychoanalytical therapeutic process is about - it's a technique whereby we are able, to a relative degree, to bring back to consciousness, to re-problematize early infantile, childhood automatisms which are no longer necessary and no longer expedient, no longer efficient.

But I think that there is also another part to this question which I want to add, in terms of my answer, and that is not only what is unconscious, but also what is instinctual, what is automatic in the sense that it is pre-programmed, hardwired, that it is - we're born with certain ways responding, and we call these instincts. And every animal has instincts, even the simplest of animals has instinctual modes of responding. We humans and other more complicated creatures have - in addition to these instinctual ways of behaving - we have free will, we have the capacity to override instinct, and to refine, revise, inhibit, complexify our responses in line with learnt experience. This is great - it allows for much flexibility, and therefore much more reductibility, it's a jolly good thing. And I don't think that all minds are equally in control when we speak about the voluntary cognitive - especially reflective cognitive - functioning that we humans have. Not all creatures have that, and yet they do have minds. And this in fact is something I'm going to pick up in this course in a few weeks from now.

I think that one of the basic features of the mental is what we call 'agency'. And unlike the other features which, as I've already told you - I believe that the mind has four basic properties: the one is subjectivity, the second is consciousness or the capacity for consciousness, the third is intentionality, which I'll explain a lot more when we get to that, and the fourth is agency. By agency I mean the degree to which we have control over or ownership of our own intentionality. And using the example of instincts, to the extent that you are driven by instinct, that you automatically, reflexively behave in a certain way because that's just the way that your mind is designed, you can't really say that you own that part of your mind, in the sense that it's not under your volitional control. And to the extent that we humans have far greater volitional control, far greater capacity to override our instincts and revise them in light of our own individualised experience, to that extent I think we are in control of our minds more than some other animals are, and more than little human animals are, and more than those of us who are unfortunate to suffer psychopathology are. In all of those instances, what we are talking about is a limitation in the degree of agency that we possess over our mental volitions and intentions.

So I think that this question of agency, unlike the other three properties of the mental, agency admits of degrees, so you can have more or less ownership of your own mental processes, depending on the sorts of criteria that I've just mentioned. Ok, so that's my attempt to answer your really interesting questions for this week, and I look forward to another four questions next week. Enjoy the course! Thanks very much. Bye bye!



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