

Week 5 Answer to Question 3
Step 6.3 Ask Mark

Question 3: we said that agency is the property of the mind that chooses between competing possible actions. Since the machinery and motivation for choosing is something that we are not completely aware of - it involves unconscious thoughts and instincts - is the reflective sense of self - the self as an object with certain properties, say shy, smart or social - a confabulation? A story that influences the decisions of actions, but exists only in our minds.

What do you mean only in our minds? Everything exists only in our minds, as far as our consciousness is concerned. Everything that we know and see is in our minds, so the representation of something in our minds doesn't make it not real. Of course, there are some things that are represented in our minds which are not real, and this is what the question is, I think, addressed to when the questioner asks is the self a confabulation, just a story, something not real?

Well, I say again, there certainly are some things in our minds which are not real, but the mental nature of the self - the fact that the self is an idea - doesn't make it not real. It's an abstract inference, from concrete perceptual data, of a thing in the world called me, which I can see. I can see it in the mirror, I can see it with my own eyes, I can touch it with my hands. There is a physical thing called me, which coincides with my sentient presence, the core of which is my affective - the representation of my body as a subject coincides that is to say - as an affective presence, coincides with the representation of myself as an object, that is to say a bodily entity. And we attach these two things - these two perceptual things - together, and out of this we construct ideas, that is to say higher-order representations, of this thing called me, which straddles both my body and my feelings. That thing is perfectly real.

To that thing - as much as we can to any other thing in the world - we can attribute - we can attach attributes. We can say "I - this thing, this idea, this abstraction derived from all of my perceptual experiences, and affective ones connected with them - I can say that I am shy, that I am social, that I am smart." The mental nature, and the representational nature, and the inferential nature of these things, doesn't make them any less real. I think there's a deeper part to this question - which remember starts with the issue of agency, and of decision-making - it's

implying perhaps that there's some sort of automatic thing going on unconsciously that's making decisions. And we then, after the fact, tell ourselves "ah, it was me who made those decisions."

Now, strictly speaking, it was you who made those decisions, and if I can refer back to the first question in this week's question-and-answer series, remember that even if you are cognitively unaware of the decisions that you - the basis for the decisions that you make, you are affectively aware. Decisions always require a value system, otherwise they're not decisions, they're random. So this is why feelings play such an important part in the mind. In the mind especially in its unconscious - cognitively unconscious dimensions. The affects are conscious - they're felt - and this is part of the perceptual basis, the empirical basis for this abstraction that you call yourself, that you call me. Which, as I say again, is perfectly real - it's no less real than any other thing in the world.

It, of course, is also possible to make a decision on an intuitive - that is to say affectively conscious, cognitively unconscious - basis, gut feel, as we say. And then, after the fact, to attach a story as to why you did that. And we do that a very great deal, that's certainly true. And there comes many a confabulation. But that's a different point - the fact that we sometimes delude ourselves as to why we did what we did. That we sometimes tell a "just so" story to account for what we did, which isn't necessarily why we did it. It doesn't mean that the story is always inaccurate, or always confabulated, and many of the decisions we make are made with deliberation, are made by the highest level of the reflective machinery of the mind, and therefore by the part that coincides with the abstraction called me. A difficult question. Possibly, therefore, not an entirely satisfactory answer, but I hope I've got to the essence of the matter.



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