

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



UCTMOOCs
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Week 5 Answer to Question 1

Step 6.3 Ask Mark

Hello. Welcome to week 5, the week in which we've considered agency, the third fundamental property of the mind. As usual I have four questions selected by the mentors, and the first question actually pertains to the first fundamental property of the mind. It reads like this - no the second, the second fundamental property, consciousness. It says:

Question 1: if consciousness is one of the four essential criteria for defining a mind, how can the unconscious mind be anything but a self-contradiction? I think the resolution might involve intermittent, partial or potential consciousness, but I may be wrong.

Well, I agree with the questioner that not all of the mind is conscious, and in fact, in week 3 I think I said as much. Which was why I tried - maybe I didn't always succeed, but I tried - to speak of the potential for consciousness as being a defining feature of the mind. That is to say, an instrument - for example an information-processing instrument like a computer - if it's never conscious, then it doesn't have a mind. If it never feels like something to be a computer, then a computer never has a mind. But just as there are unconscious processes - problem solving processes, memory processes and the like - that occur unconsciously in the computer, so too there are unconscious information processes in the mind, and the question then becomes: what is it that makes those mental, if they're not conscious? And my answer was with reference to two other things. The one is what I've already said, which is that they are capable of becoming conscious. They may not be conscious, but that instrument has the capacity for consciousness - that doesn't mean all of its processes are conscious. And the second criterion is that the unconscious ones - unconscious information processing in the mind is mental by dint of the fact that it's intentional. And everything that I mean by intentionality we covered last week, so I'm not going to restate all of those arguments.

I just want to come back to the nub of the question here, which is: is all of the mind conscious or of the time? My answer - as I've already said - is no, it's not conscious all of the time. However, I'd like to draw a fundamental distinction here, as I have before, between cognitive consciousness and affective consciousness. Affects - that is to say emotional feelings - are always felt. It makes no sense to speak of a feeling that you don't feel - if you don't feel it, it's a

not a feeling. Therefore the affective part of the mind is always conscious. Affects - when activated - are conscious by definition. It is the cognitive part of the mind that operates, in large part, unconsciously. When I say in large part, I should say in very large part, because it's only a very small portion of the cognitive contents of the mind that are capable of conscious representation at any one point in time. We in fact can rather precisely measure it. The standard assertion in cognitive neuroscience or in neuropsychology is that we - we humans - are only capable of holding seven or perhaps eight bits of information in consciousness at any one moment. And if you compare those seven or eight bits of information with the multiplicity, multitude, universe of the totality of information in the cognitive part of your mind, then you see how very small a place cognitive consciousness is, relative to the unconscious part of the mind.

Please remember, the unconscious part of the mind - that is to say unconscious cognition - is defined as mental because it's intentional. And here I want to refer to the affective part of the mind which plays such an important part in intentionality. The affective part of the mind is always conscious, as I've just said. Now it's the affects that guide the unconscious cognitions - affects are felt and they guide our unconscious cognitions. It's a terminological problem that we fall into all the time. My colleagues in the cognitive neurosciences, and not only them - psychoanalysts too - when they speak of something as being unconscious, they say the patient was unconscious of blah blah blah, or the experimental subject was unconscious of the stimulus. They're referring to the cognitive aspect of their mental processes. They are not referring to their affective state. The patients or experimental subjects are not in a coma, they're not unconscious. They are affectively present, sentient beings, merely unconscious of the particular cognitive information processing that they're currently conducting. And their conscious affects guide those unconscious information processes.

We have demonstrated this experimentally in, for example, subliminal stimulation experiments, where the experimental subject is shown words - positive or negatively toned affective words, like ugly, scary or beautiful, tasty - words like that. Those - by seeing those words unconsciously in a tachistoscope, where the word is flashed so briefly that the person doesn't even register that they've seen anything, let alone a word, let alone the particular word that they've read - you can demonstrate from their subsequent behavior, that they have been influenced by the word that they read. That shows that they are unconsciously responding to read words. Now please note, the reading and understanding of words is a cognitive operation. In the standard experiment, that's the conclusion: look, you can be unconsciously motivated, and that we know. What the other version of the experiment - which was done by my pal Jaak Panksepp, and my other pal Howie Shevrin - what they showed was, if you ask those very same experimental subjects to indicate on a cartoon which shows happy or unhappy faces, or big or small things how - whether their feeling became larger, or whether their feeling became more or less pleasant or unpleasant, by way of these cartoons, after they've seen the written words which they don't know they've

seen - they indicate on the cartoons their affective state, and their affective state predicts their subsequent responses. So I say again, just to be clear, they are responding unconsciously, but only cognitively unconsciously. Their affective state is conscious, and it's their affective state that influences their behavior. So I hope that's clear, and thanks for the question, and the opportunity it represents for clarifying this really fundamentally important matter.



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