



*Breath* by Pippa Skotnes

WEEK 1 UNDERSTANDING THE MIND  
STEP 1.6 MANY DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

## WHAT IS A MIND? – PERSPECTIVES

What is a mind? Traditionally, this was a question that would be relegated to the **Humanities**. (In fact the German term for Humanities is *Geisteswissenschaften*, which literally means 'mental sciences'.) In the Humanities the question 'what is a mind?' is read as something imponderable, something akin to the question 'What is it to be human?'. No-one ever really expects to find the answer. The infinite scope and complexity of the life of the mind is thereby recognised in the Humanities.

However, within the Humanities, the discipline of **Philosophy** has made some rigorous attempts to actually answer the question. This applies especially to the branch of Philosophy known as the Philosophy of Mind. But since the different philosophies of mind start from different first principles, no-one can ever decide between them; there is no 'correct' philosophy of mind. Thus for example, two equally famous contemporary philosophers hold diametrically opposite positions: for one (Daniel Dennett) the mind does not really exist, it is an abstraction rather than a thing; for the other (Thomas Nagel) the mind is an irreducible property of nature.

The question is also addressed by the **Arts**, but less directly. The Arts could be seen as an application of the question 'What is a mind?' or 'What is it to be human?'. The question is explored through acts of writing or painting or composing, etc, rather than through scholarship. Naturally, in the Arts no less than in the Humanities, no-one ever agrees and there is no question of finding the answer.

**Psychology** turned the Philosophy of Mind into a science. It aspires to answer the question empirically. Psychology studies the mind in just the same way as one would study any other part of nature. For Psychology, the question 'what is a mind?' is therefore no different from the question 'what is an atom?'. In order to treat the mind as if it were the same in principle as matter, however, it has to translate the subjective stuff of the mind into something externally observable (and preferably measurable too). Usually this boils down to studying behaviour rather than experience; psychologists study the 'outputs' of the mind. Inferences about the underlying structure of the mind itself must be framed in ways that give rise to testable predictions about behaviour.

## WHAT IS A MIND?

In **Psychoanalysis**, however, the mind is approached on its own terms, subjectively: what is this person experiencing and what does it mean? For this, psychoanalysts rely mainly on unedited first-person descriptions of the experiences of their patients. Then they try to make sense of it all by looking for underlying organising principles. Importantly, in doing so, psychoanalysts believe that conscious experience does not transparently reveal the structure of the personality; the deep structure of conscious experience is unconscious. In this way, even psychoanalysts ultimately have to translate the subjective stuff of the mind into something else, into an abstraction they call 'the unconscious'.

In **Neuroscience** the mind is approached from the viewpoint of its anatomical and physiological scene of action: the brain -- or 'organ of the mind'. Therefore, like Psychology, Neuroscience translates the subjective stuff of the mind into something objective -- something externally observable -- but Neuroscience objectifies the mind by literally turning it into an object. On this basis, brain states can be studied as proxies for mental states.

In **Computer Science**, too, the mind is studied indirectly; but unlike Neuroscience, which studies the actual hardware of the mind, computer scientists construct artificial models of the mental instrument, using computers. This enables computer scientists to test their models in highly controlled conditions; but the price that they pay for this precision is uncertainty regarding the relationship between their models and reality. Very few scientists believe that computers actually have minds.



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