

# WHAT IS A MIND?

## UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



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### Week 2 Answer to Question 4

#### Step 3.3 Ask Mark

And so we turn to the fourth and last question for this week, and it reads like this:

**Question 4:** you state that the subconscious is derived through the conscious, but does that mean that the unconscious cannot receive inputs from perception on its own? I would say that a lot of perception, for example seeing, is processed unconsciously - such as in blindsight - and these unconsciously received inputs can affect feeling and behavior. Can you perhaps explain these two seemingly different standpoints?

So just to be clear, the the source of the puzzlement here is my statement that the unconscious is derived from consciousness, and the questioner is saying but surely there are many things in the unconscious that never pass through consciousness - there are things which we perceive unconsciously from the get-go, and yet they influence our behavior, and so the unconscious is being influenced by things that never were conscious. That's the question.

Now I need to make two fundamental distinctions in order to address this question. The first is, and this is really important - it leads to endless confusion, and not only in this course - I hope in this course less so than usual - but it leads to endless confusion among psychologists, it leads to endless confusion in cognitive neuroscience - when people use the word unconscious, they are referring to cognition. They are not referring to affect. They don't even think about affect for the most part - it's sort of astonishing how much affect is neglected in cognitive neuroscience and in psychology as a whole. I say it's astonishing because, from my point-of-view, affect is the bedrock of the mind, as I hope I'm beginning to make clear in this course. But if each one of us looks to our own personal lives, I mean, how can you leave out the feelings? The feelings is what makes it all matter! It's the only reason we care, is because of how it feels.

So it is truly astonishing how, in the history of mental science, affect and emotion has been relegated to the margins, if not overlooked entirely. And here's a very basic case-in-point: when people say the processing of the information is unconscious, they mean it is cognitively unconscious. So to refer to the example that the questioner mentions, the example of blindsight, the questioner says: here we have information coming in from the outside, it's processed without

consciousness, and it affects what the person does, so clearly there's no need for consciousness here. What they're referring to is a well-known phenomenon whereby people who are blind due to damage to the occipital cortex, damage at the back of their brains - there's nothing wrong with their eyes - so information goes in through the eye, goes to the subcortical parts of the brain, but the information that goes to the cortical part, which normally would generate conscious vision - conscious vision which is a part of cognition - the conscious vision doesn't occur. But there is other information that's sent down to a part of the brain called the superior - called the corpora quadrigemina, the colliculi, the tectum - that part of the upper brain stem receives the visual information unconsciously, and it affects the way that the patient behaves. But, again I need to emphasize that what's being received is unconscious cognitive information. By cognitive information I mean the information referring to the outside world that has to do with a mapping of where things are in space, and the processing of that spatial information in the brain. You can process spatial information in the brain without knowing that you are processing it, in other words without being conscious of the cognitive operations that you are performing, but that does not mean that you are affectively unconscious. That's the essence of the matter. When those patients - when you ask them "where am I pointing the light?", they say "Mark, I don't know where you're pointing the light because I'm blind! How silly of you to ask 'where am I pointing the light.' And I say "yes, I know it's silly. Yes, you're blind - in other words you don't have consciousness of that aspect of cognition that we call vision - but just guess. Please indulge me - guess, even though you can't see where the light beam is shining, just point as to where you feel it might be, where you intuit it might be." And that's what they do. They then point - way above chance - to the correct place. In other words, they are receiving the visual information, even though they're not conscious of the fact that they're receiving the information. But they make their decision on the basis of what they describe as a "gut feeling", or a "hunch", or an "intuition". That's what I mean by the affective dimension. The affect, in other words, is conscious. The affect is not unconscious, and when we say that these patients are unconscious, we use the word too broadly because we are prejudiced in our use of the word toward cognition as opposed to affect - we leave out the affect.

So to come back to the question, the broader question that's being asked here - I'm being asked: is it not true that when I say that the unconscious is derived from consciousness, is it not true that there's information that alters the way that we behave, information that we receive completely unconsciously, I say yes and no. It's true that we receive that information - from the cognitive point-of-view - unconsciously, but it is not true - from the affective point-of-view - that we are unconscious. We are conscious of our feelings, we are conscious of our hunches, we are conscious - to refer back to the previous question - we are conscious of the value system which tells us whether something feels right or feels wrong. So the blind patient says "it feels right to say that the beam is pointing there." Affectively, the feeling state that they're conscious of suggests to them that this would be the right answer, this is the right place to go - this feels, my

intuition tells me, I have a hunch that - this is the right way to go. And that's the basis upon which they make the decision.

It's not unlike what happens in lower animals. In fishes, for example, who have a superior colliculus they have a tectum, they have the corpora quadrigemina that we do - little ones, but you know, basically doing the same thing - and they have information from their eyes that go to that part of their brains. That doesn't mean that they have the same visual consciousness that we do. So fish is busy bloop-bloop-blooping around in a pond, and food is plonked in a certain place, and they - in their random way, on meandering all over the pond - at a certain place they find the food, and then they swallow it, and they feel better. "Oh good," you know, "I've had some food!" They don't have all these complicated thoughts, but they have feelings. Now they tend - the next time they're hungry - to head to that same place. They don't need necessarily to have a conscious image of where that place is, they don't need to have a model of what they're seeking in the outside visual world which they hold in mind which guides their behavior, they just have this intuition, they just have this hunch, you know, that it's better to be there - this place feels better, good things happen here - and they don't have to have any complex visual consciousness at all. Of course, it adds something. It's great to have it - we do have that kind of visual consciousness which guides our behavior, but remember remember remember: the visual consciousness, that is to say the cognitive consciousness, is in the service of affect. Affect is primary, the feelings are primary. Feelings present problems to the mind - to the cognitive mind. The cognitive mind then performs cognitive work in order to solve those problems. But the only thing that gets them going in the first place - the cognitions that is - is the feelings.

And so that is the distinction that I need to make in order to answer this question. I agree, yes, there's a lot of things that happen in the world that influence us unconsciously, in the sense that we are cognitively unaware of what we're doing, but it's not true that these things happen affectively unconsciously. We always feel things if they're going to influence us. The only basis upon which they influence us is via feeling. And I refer back to what I said earlier today: that we could not make decisions unless there was some value system on the basis of which we make them. Otherwise our decisions would be random. There has to be some scale of values which says this is good, this is bad, and that is what affects are for. That is what feelings are for - feelings guide behavior, feelings guide cognition, even unconscious cognitions are guided by feelings.

And so, to conclude, I stand by my assertion that the unconscious is made up - is constituted by - previously conscious states which then become automatized. It's the only way it can be. The unconscious doesn't just happen. The unconscious has to happen on the basis of some sort of rules, some sort of decision making process. Once you've made the decision "this is what I'm going to do, this is the way I'm going to meet my needs in the world", you don't need to

consciously think your way through the problem all over and over again every time. That's why you automatize the process once it's solved. But you can only solve it with feelings.

So, in the first instance, the way that we behave is affected by emotional states, thereafter they can become unconscious - in both senses of the word - and that is when something is truly unconscious: when there's neither cognitive nor affective consciousness. That's the deep unconscious that we all know exists, that we all know from our own personal experience guides our behavior. But if we were too lay down automatic, stereotyped unconscious action patterns without the reference in the first place that guides them - the values as to whether this is a good or a bad thing to do - then we would be in a terrible mess. I know we're in a terrible mess anyway, but we'd be in a much worse mess if it weren't for the mechanisms that I'm talking about. So I hope that clarifies my statements about the unconscious being derived from conscious experience. The crucial distinction is: affective or emotional conscious experience does not have to have cognitive consciousness attached to it.

Okay, thanks very much. As always, I find these questions really interesting, and I enjoy answering them, so keep them rolling in. And I hope you enjoy the course, and I look forward to talking to you again next week. Bye!



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