

Week 2 Answer to Question 1
Step 3.3 Ask Mark

Hello. Welcome to the second session of questions and answers, the so-called “Ask Mark”. As always, we have four questions selected by the mentors, and I'll dive straight in with the first question, which goes like this:

Question 1: I, like several others, am totally confused about what you mean by subjectivity. The description you gave didn't help me much. I would like to pose the question about subjectivity in a different way in the hope of getting an answer that reduces my confusion a bit more. It is stated that everything has the property of subjectivity (including carpets!) If that's true, how can subjectivity be a defining property of the mind? Isn't it a pretty useless defining property that fails to distinguish mind from anything else in the universe.

So, first of all, apologies for the confusion, and I welcome the opportunity to clarify what I mean. It's I think fundamental to my answer is the fact that I don't believe that any one of the properties of the mind that I am enumerating through this course - and I remind you there are four properties: the first is subjectivity, the second is the capacity for consciousness, the third is intentionality, and the fourth is agency - I don't believe that subjectivity by itself is a sufficient defining property of the mental, and that's why I add the other properties. That's why I believe it's necessary to have a little list of properties, because no one of those properties by themselves does justice to the problem.

Nevertheless, I start with the problem of subjectivity - or rather with the characteristic of subjectivity - because I think that is the most fundamental defining property of the mental. In other words the mind is something subjective. It is something that you experience from the point of view of being one. You cannot observe a mind from the outside, you can only observe a mind from the point-of-view of being a mind - that is to say the mind is not an object. The mind is not a thing, it's not a solid material entity that you can experience from the outside. You can only experience it from the inside. This, as I said in the course, creates all sorts of difficulties for the study of the mind, the scientific study of the mind. It's very hard to study something that is not an object, since science aspires to objectivity. Nevertheless, I think it's an inescapable fact that the mind is, first and foremost, something subjective - that is to say you can only ever experience

your own, you can only ever experience the mind from the viewpoint - or observe the mind from the viewpoint - of being a mind, that is to say the mind is a subject.

Now we come to the complication that the questioner is asking about, and before I address that complication, let me make - let me hopefully make - something a little clearer. By subjective observational perspective, I'm - by that phrase I'm referring to just that, to an observational perspective. It has to do with the point-of-view, it has to do with the relationship between the observer and the thing being observed. The observer, in the case of the study of the mind, is a subject studying something inside of him or herself. They cannot be outside of the mind and observe it from an external perspective. It's this intrinsic internal perspective - this subjective perspective - that I'm wanting to emphasize as my starting point in our attempts to explore the properties of the mental.

Now, as I said, I'm leading up to the nub of the problem that the questioner is puzzled by: everything has a subjective perspective. If I say that there are two ways you can observe something, either from the outside as an object, or from the inside, from the being of that thing - that's what subjective perspective means - then we have too broad a category for us to be able to say "that defines the mental". That's exactly what the questioner is saying, and I agree that that is a problem. That is why we need to then go further and say, well, if even carpets have a subjective perspective, if everything can be described from the point-of-view of being that thing, then we haven't done enough to be able to distinguish what is mental from so many other things that are patently not mental.

And that's what leads us onto the second property, that if it doesn't feel like something to be a subject, then you are not a mental subject. So although it is, in some logical sense, possible to describe the outside, the carpet viewed from the outside, and the carpet viewed from the inside, in other words, there is such a thing as a subjective perspective - logically there must be, spatially there must be, a subjective perspective to everything - it's patent nonsense to say that everything has a mind. And that's why I'm saying - if I may say it again, as clearly as I can - firstly, the mind is subjective - in other words it can only be viewed from the subjective perspective, it can only be viewed from the point of view of being a mind - but secondly, that is not enough of a defining criterion, that's why we need to add something else, namely that it has to feel like something to be the entity that we're calling a mind, and that's what leads us on to the next defining property, namely the capacity for consciousness.

I know it's difficult, believe me! I'm sorry, I'm not trying to befuddle you, I'm trying to do the very opposite! But I hope you can understand why I must insist that the starting point of the study of the mind must be a subjective one, because the mind can only ever be observed in that way. Why I stress this so much is because this is the mistake that we've made in the history of

psychology, almost throughout the whole of the 20th century - and many of us carry that mistake on into the 21st century - that if you try to turn the mind into an object in order to get around this problem, as we did in the 20th century, by studying behavior rather than studying the mind, or as we do nowadays, by studying the brain rather than studying the mind, it makes life a lot easier. You're studying a thing then, you're studying an object then, and you can do science then, but you're not studying the mind, because the mind is something subjective. I do hope I've clarified it, I don't think I can do much better. So if I've still lost you, I despair, but I hope I haven't lost all of you. Thank you.



Mark Solms 2016

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