WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Week 2 Answer to Question 2

Step 3.3 Ask Mark

Ok, now we move to the second question.

Question 2: I kept thinking, during the testing for subjectivity video, well, how do we tell if animals have minds, or anything else in nature? I'm fascinated at the idea that every living thing has its own mind. A recent study published concluded that trees actually speak to one another. Does this mean that they themselves think?

Well, I hope you can see - and perhaps this is why the mentors selected these two questions and presented them to me in this sequence - I hope you can see how this second question builds on the first. It cuts again to the problem of if everything has a subjective aspect, does that mean everything has a mind? Except the questioner here has narrowed the field somewhat, is not talking about carpets, as I mischievously did in the course itself. But rather the questioner is talking about living things, and the question is do all living things have a mind? And their specific reference to trees, and to the fact that trees speak to one another.

Well, let me first of all just clarify for a moment this issue of trees speaking to each other. I think the word "speaking" is probably inappropriate here, because speaking implies a thinking process that lies behind the communications. Trees, there's no evidence that they speak to each other, there is evidence that they communicate with each other, as indeed there is evidence that a great multitude of living things communicate with each other. Just think, for example, of the immune system: it's a communication system, but it's questionable as to whether there are thought processes in the immune system. The same could be said of individual cells: a cell in proximity with another cell affects that second cell, that is to say information is transferred from the one cell to the other, but it's questionable as to whether what we're dealing with here is speech, and with thought processes which underpin what we call speech in the case of our own species.

So to come back to the question - the questioner is fascinated by the idea that all living things, having a subjective aspect, might be said to have a mind, or might be said to have thought processes. Now the way I'm constructing this course - sort of systematically going through the different properties of the mental as I see them - is to slowly build up a picture which enables us

to narrow down what might be considered essential properties of something before we are willing to attribute a mind to it. I've already said - to the puzzlement of the first questioner - that the first property is that it has to be something subjective. The mind has to be observable from within - it's the only way you can ever observe it. And then I move on, in week 3 I move on to clarifying that it's necessary to feel like something - the subjective being of a living thing can only be called its mind if it feels like something, that is to say if it is capable of consciousness, if it is a sentient thing.

So we can now reframe question 2 and ask: "are trees sentient things? Does it feel like something to be a tree?" In a way these are silly questions, but I think that I'm trying to introduce a sort of clarity of thought - paradoxically perhaps that's what I'm trying to do - trying to pare things down to the absolute essentials. So the subjective aspect of a tree, might it be described as a mind? Well, I say the next criterion that we have to fulfil if we're going to say it is a mind, is we have to demonstrate somehow that it feels like something to be a tree. That leads to the heart of the matter that I'm going to be addressing in week 3: how do we know if it feels like something to be a tree? If the mind is something subjective, if you can only observe it from the internal subjective point-of-view, how can you know whether or not it feels like something to be a tree? And this is a methodological, and indeed epistemological problem that the whole of the science of psychology faces. Because of the problem of other minds which states that you can never know whether anything else has a mind directly - you can never perceive the mind of anything else precisely because the mind can only ever be observed or perceived subjectively - we have to find some objective criterion for determining whether or not something else has a mind. And the famous Turing test - Alan Turing invented the famous Turing test as one object of way of going about that, and I'm going to be discussing that in the course this week.

So I would be pre-empting everything that I say in the course if I was to go further than to say what I've said already, and I will just restate it in fewer words. The question as to whether or not trees or any other living thing have a mind, in my opinion, depends upon whether there's evidence for the hypothesis that it feels like something to be a tree - in other words, there is such a thing as "tree consciousness". And what I'm wanting to address with you this week is how do we go about determining whether or not something has consciousness? To give you a little sneak preview, I say that we have to start with what we know objectively about the tissues, the anatomy and physiology that generates consciousness in our own case. We know in our own case that we do feel like something, that we do have minds. We can use objective methods to determine what anatomy and physiology in our human brains makes that possible, and then we can search - in the case of other living things - for analogous structures. That's where I'm going with the course.

And I must say - again, perhaps I'm saying too much too soon - but you will see - once you've had an opportunity to look at this week's course, at this week's lessons - that I don't believe that we can - that the empirical evidence suggests that trees do have feelings. The empirical evidence does not suggest that. I'm stating it in the negative because that's the only way we can do things in science. We can't ever make absolute claims to knowledge. We can only speak positively about what the evidence does confirm, and we cannot confirm that trees have the structures which in our own case, in the case of humans, are necessary for the generation of consciousness. I hasten to add - and this will be the last thing I say on this question - that the thing, the tissues in the human brain that generate consciousness are by no means exclusively human, so I'm not claiming some sort of human chauvinism, that only we have consciousness. The evidence suggests far from that. A very great many creatures, positively there's evidence that they do have consciousness, but that evidence doesn't extend to all living things.