

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 1 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 2

Okay, here comes the second question. It's this. Why has there been no mention of language in relation to the mind? Can a mind exist without language? Do different languages produce different states of mind?

So this is an interesting question. You are indeed, correct to say that I have not mentioned language and in particular, I have not mentioned language as being one of the fundamental ingredients of the mind. I say that the mind is made of subjectivity, the mind is made of consciousness, or of sentience, the mind is made of intentionality and lastly of agency and where does language fit into all of that?

Where language fits into all of it is that it isn't an essential ingredient of the mind. Language is not one of the component, the constituent elements of the mental. Language is an instrument of the mind, it's something that we use in order to do the stuff that I've just been talking about. Language is a tool, it's an instrument in much the same way as memory is a tool and an instrument. And please note, I haven't mentioned memory as being a fundamental component of the mind. That's because I believe that our mind uses our memory and uses our language but it isn't constituted by those things. And perhaps the point can be easier to understand if you recognise that memory, for example, or language, they're not specifically, or they are not essentially necessarily mental things.

A computer has a language. A computer has a memory. But a computer by my definition, doesn't have a mind. Why not? It's because it doesn't have subjectivity, it doesn't have sentience, it doesn't have intentionality, and it doesn't have agency. That's why a computer does not have a mind. So you can't say that a computer doesn't have a mind because it doesn't have memory and you can't say that a computer doesn't have a mind because it doesn't have a language. It does. It does have those two things and this speaks to the essential point that I'm trying to make. I'm trying to get to what is the nub of the mental, what is definitional, what is essential, necessary conditions for the existence of a mind? The mind uses language and the mind uses memory, etcetera.

Now, to approach the same question in a different way, the questioner is asking, do we not, how can we speak of a mind without language? Well just think about animals, think about your pet dog, or your pet cat. Do you really believe that your dog and your cat don't have minds? Well, I think that that's crazy. It's patently obvious that they have minds but I'm not asking you to just believe me as an act of faith. And this is also why we're doing this course. I'm trying to, I'm trying to disassemble, deconstruct what I mean by the mind with reference to evidence and mainly with reference to evidence derived from the neurosciences. Now I'm trying to see, is there a way in which we can do natural science on this thing that we call the mind? So that we can come to a reliable, verifiable, testable conclusions about what kind of creature, or what kind of thing does have a mind and what kind of thing doesn't. So I have already begun in the course, to outline for you what the evidence is for my view that dogs have minds and cats have minds. And I refer you to the rest of the course for the rest of that evidence, so I'm not going to repeat it all here. But I just want to make that sort of conceptual point that I believe animals have minds and in this course I'll explain why and that's another reason why I don't believe that language is an essential ingredient of the mind. And, in fact, for that matter, pre-verbal infants clearly have minds and yet they don't have language. They have not yet acquired language.

It is not necessary to declare, I have a mind, in order to infer that a creature has a mental life. But I know where the question is coming from. Where the question is coming from, is that so much of our mental experience, us adult

humans, so much of our mental experience is dominated by thinking and thinking is, for the most part, coded in language. But thinking is, and is specifically language mediated thinking, that is to say reflective thinking. There's symbolic thinking. This is, this is a higher order of consciousness, it's reflecting upon your cognitions, it's thinking about the contents of your mind. This is what language, this is the most powerful additional feature of the mental that language contributes. It enables us to abstract from experience and think about experience, which is an extremely important thing. It enables you to objectify yourself, to see yourself from a third person point of view. Me in relation to others, thinking about what I'm doing rather than just concretely doing the thing. Thinking in action. It's rather thinking about actions rather, that don't even have to actually be performed. They can be thought about in the abstract.

So, those are the main things that I wanted to say. When the questioner asks, do we not have different types of thoughts with different types of language, well I'm answering this firstly in the general sense that, yes, you can have a different kind of thinking when you have language. Because language enables you to abstract yourself, it's a re-representation. It's a representation of your representations. It is a representing of your own thoughts. It's thinking about your thoughts. That is a definitely a kind of thinking that's not possible if you don't have language or some other symbolic coding scheme like language. And that is what distinguishes us from dogs and cats and all the more so, from fishes and lizards. You know, they just don't have the capacity for that type of mental state, but that is only a type of mental state. It is not the mental itself and I think that we get confused if we start with the human. Very complicated, very specific type of mind and use that as our sort of, basis for determining what the mental is. There have been minds for long, a lot longer on this planet than there have been humans and we get misled by starting with this late, complex form of the mind. We get misled as to what its essential ingredients are, and to language, as I'm saying, is one such example. It's not an essential ingredient of the mental.

But the question also implies do we not have different types of thoughts with different languages? And this refers to a theory called Cognitive Relativism, the so-called Whorf Sapir Hypothesis. Which incidentally is out of favour these days, it's not fashionable anymore. I'm not entirely sure why. I am quite happy to accept a very weak form of the Whorf Sapir Hypothesis. There's certain kinds of things you can think in German that you can't think in English simply because there are words for things in German for which there are no words in English. So. But this is. I can think of a thing called Besetzung. In German, there's a thing called a Besetzung for which in English there are many different words; occupation, charge, investment, interest, filling, casting. So these are a whole lot of different things and each of those words brings different images to mind, whereas the German word Besetzung brings Besetzung to mind and there's no one word in English that does that. So, in that weak sense, yes, of course, there are certain kinds of mental content that you can have that are denoted by certain words and if other languages don't have those words, then you don't have that denotation, you don't have that content.

But I doubt that that's really what the questioner is getting at. In terms of the fundamental point, no, language is not a necessary component of the mental. Although having language certainly complexifies the mind and enables it to do things that it otherwise couldn't do. For me, language is a tool of the mind, an instrument of the mind. It's a nice to have, but it is not a core component of what the mental itself consists in.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).