

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 1 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 4

And now we move toward the fourth and last one, which goes like this. Question four, why is the mind, on one side our greatest asset, also our greatest enemy? Why does it work so hard against the organism upon which it depends for its very survival?

So, I don't know who asked that question but you have my sympathy. I'm sorry that your mind or your experience of your mind is that it's something that's working against your body. But, I certainly know what you're talking about.

So, in order for me to answer this question, let me go back to where I began in question one and that is to remind you that the mind has two great sources of input. The one is from the outside world and the other is from the internal world of you, yourself. The mind is, in a very profound sense, the mediator between what comes from inside of you, that is your needs felt as feelings which, as I say, are demands for work, they represent states of need, the states of my body, there's something that needs attending to here, those are, that's what's coming from within, from your body. And then, from without, through your sensory organs, you get information about the state of the outside world. And, what the mind does is links those two things with each other. How do I meet my needs in the world?

And so, learning is about learning to marry up, to match, to make connections between the great multiplicity of needs felt as emotional feelings and everything I've learnt through perception and memory and lived experience of the outside world, how do I meet my needs there. So, the mind represents two different things. The one of them is you, your body, to use the language of the questioner, and the other is the outside world, which is indifferent to you. It doesn't care about you, except, your parents with a bit of luck, they care about you. That's why parents are so unusual and so important in mental life, by the way. But, for the most part, the world is indifferent to your needs. Not only other people but, you know, the bananas and apples and water that you need out there doesn't give two hoots about you. It's just there.

And then you have to remember that the other people, not only are they indifferent to you, they are competing with you for those same apples and bananas and water. So, you have to learn about the world out there and your mind represents it. All of the constraints and all the disappointments and all of the bad news that you've got to take on board in order to learn how the world really works. And then, on the other hand, it represents your body.

So, not to put too fine a point on it, the mind is in conflict. Remember this chap, Sigmund Freud? That was one of his great discoveries. The mind is fundamentally conflicted all the time. That's because you have needs, which are ever present, and then there's the outside world, which is the only place where you can meet your needs, and you have to learn, your mind has to learn about how to deal with the constraints and the prohibitions and the limits imposed and the dangers arising from the outside world. And then, it represents those inside of your mind, inside of your memory, which then becomes a very important tool for your mind to learn how do I best meet my needs in the outside world, given the fact that the outside world is not trying to help me. So, that's where this conflict comes.

So, the questioner, who says why does our mind work against our bodies, what he or she is referring to is this second part of the mind. Which is not... It represents reality, it represents constraints and that includes social constraints, social prohibitions, things which make us feel guilty and ashamed and embarrassed and so on, working against our

bodily needs. But, you know, unfortunately, that's just because that's how the world is. Life is difficult and our mind is doing us a favour by teaching us that that's how it is. That's what mental maturation is all about.

Now, of course, as with every mechanism, every biological mechanism, every mechanism of every description, the design of a mechanism, in other words, the teleological purpose, what it's there for, explains why it works the way it does, it doesn't mean it always works well. Every mechanism can go awry. Everything can misfire. And so, you can have aberrations of these mechanisms, aberrations of the reality principle as Freud called it where you think too much about the constraints and prohibitions and so on. And then you get things like, for example, obsessive compulsive disorder, where you're working against yourself. Your mind seems to be, you know, an absolute tyrant working against your, the needs of the body. But those are... One should not confuse abnormalities with the basic design but the understanding of the basic design helps us to analyse, to pick apart, to deconstruct how those aberrations work. What it is, what the basic moving parts are that have gone awry there, which of course, helps us to be able to put things to rights again.

Okay so, thank you very much. See you next week. Bye-bye.



Mark Solms, 2016

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