

WEEK 1 ANSWER TO QUESTION 2
STEP 2.3 ASK MARK

The second question this week actually is quite closely related to that first one that I just read you, so let me read the second question. It goes like this. Question two: “Should we expect the presence of the mind in species who have no speech or language? In other words, is language essential for the mind? Does language have to be involved in order to process or make proper sense of the thoughts activated by feelings?”

In answering this question, I'd like to emphasise this last bit: does language have to be involved in order to process or make “proper sense of” the thoughts activated by feelings. The phrase “make proper sense of” implies degrees of properness, and the question of the role of language in the mind has everything to do with degrees.

So let me address it this way. I think it's a big problem in our general way of thinking about the mind that we start with human minds as the sort of paradigm, as the paradigmatic example of what a mind is. We all know from our own personal experience what our minds are like, so we think “OK, that's what a mind is. Now let's see who else has a thing like this. Which other creatures have a mind like we do?”

And of course, when it comes to the role of language in the mind, we are more or less unique. So that would lead you to the conclusion – which is the essence of what this question is asking about – well then, therefore, only us humans have minds. And language certainly is intrinsic to the human mind, but if you think about it for a second, it's kind of absurd.

It's an absurdity to imagine that, all of a sudden, a few tens of thousands of years ago, human language appears, and with that the mind appeared in nature. That in all the other creatures, and all the other aeons of time in which there have been living creatures on our planet, there was no mind, until suddenly one day – bingo – with language, the mind appeared. That's just not how evolution works. There's every reason to suppose that there's some sort of precursor of the human mind in non-human species, or in pre-human species.

In our ancestors – before they acquired language – there would have been some sort of mind that was not identical with the mind we have now, but which was nonetheless the sort of prototype for the mind, and then you go backwards and backwards and backwards. And it's a very interesting question to ponder “At what point in the evolution did the mind appear?” And what form did it take, as opposed to the mind that we now have in the current state of our species.

I'm going to discuss all of these things in this course at great length, so again, I'm not going to elaborate too much now in this introductory week. But I will give some sort

of foretaste of where we're heading by telling you that there is a part of the brain – of the human brain – that's known as the periaqueductal grey, and this part of the brain generates consciousness.

In fact, it is the most intense consciousness producing tissue in the human brain. It's a small, tiny little area – the size of a Jelly Bean – that's the smallest area of brain tissue, which when damaged, there is a total loss of consciousness. So that's what I mean when I say that's the most condensed or concentrated consciousness producing tissue that we have in our brains.

Now the interesting thing is that many other creatures have periaqueductal grey. In fact, all vertebrates have periaqueductal grey. And so that dates-- well, first of all let me say, what reason do we have to believe that the periaqueductal grey also generates consciousness in other creatures? Well, that's a very difficult matter. How do you know whether it's doing-- in an animal that can't speak, how do you know that it has feelings?

Well, the fact is, even in an animal that can speak, you don't know if it has feelings, because it might just be a zombie that has this programme in it that makes it say, “I have feelings.” But you still can't actually – yourself – observe those things. This is something I'm also going to talk about a lot next week. The point is – all the evidence suggests – if you tell me you have feelings, that you do. And all the evidence suggests that the essence of the consciousness produced by your brain has everything to do with the periaqueductal grey.

The same can be said of all other creatures that have this tissue. If you make a prediction about what will happen if you damage that part of the brain, your prediction is confirmed – the animal will fall into a coma. If you make a prediction as to what'll happen if you stimulate it, the animal will have a very strong emotional state – its behaviour demonstrates the emotional state that you predicted, and so on. So there's every reason to believe that every creature with that structure has a mind.

There's no question about some of these vertebrates having anything beginning to resemble language. I'm talking of fishes and lizards and snakes. All of these creatures have periaqueductal grey. But they have nothing resembling language. So I am of the view that the mind is something entirely independent of language. The mind long predates - the emergence of the mind in nature - long predates the emergence of language.

That's not to say that language doesn't do something fundamentally different to the mind, and that comes back to what I was saying in the first question: language seems very important for awareness, in the technical sense of being able to reflect upon your mental states.

Language enables you to abstract yourself from the raw phenomenal feeling and think about the feelings. And it's that type of mentation, reflective mentation – self-awareness if you will – that is so deeply bound up with language.

So I hope that was clear. That's my attempt at an answer to the second question.



Mark Solms 2015

Unless otherwise stated, this material is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). This means you are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work as long as you: attribute the authors of the work; do not use the work for commercial purposes and do not remix or adapt any copies.