

WEEK 2 ANSWER TO QUESTION 3
STEP 3.3 ASK MARK

Question 3: are there different levels of mind - by this I mean, the mind of, for example, elephants and dolphins in many ways seem superior to ours, yet according to us humans we see ourselves as superior. We are judging them against our experiences, because we can't experience some of theirs.

I hope that it's clear what this question is about - it's a matter of "are human mind the most superior of minds?" and surely in some respects other creatures are superior to us, we are just judging them by our standards. Surely it's possible that other creatures have experiences which are unknowable to us and for that reason we are not measuring them against ourselves on fair terms. We start with our own experiences, take them as the standard and then see who else has what we have and do they have as much? I think that this a very common problem and I think that it's very widespread, the idea that humans are the best, that we have the most impressive mental faculties of all the animals. Now, it may surprise some of you to know that I don't altogether agree with this mental relativist attitude. I don't agree that all minds are equal and the basis for my saying that is that I draw a distinction between two aspects of what we are calling the mind: the one aspect is "what are the core ingredients, or the core properties that something has to possess in order for it to be described as 'mental'?" "What is absolutely necessary and sufficient for a mind to exist?" As opposed to, on the other hand, what instruments are available to that mind? What tools are available? What tricks does it have at its disposal as opposed to the mind itself?

So let me start with the first one, which is really what this course is about. This course is about trying to identify what those core features of the mind are, what the absolutely necessary conditions for the existence of a mind to be - what are they? I've said that first of all, it's subjective - the mind is the product of something - secondly, it has to feel like something to be that thing, in other words, it has to be capable of consciousness. Thirdly, it has to have volition or intentionality and I'll say a lot more about that in due course, but I can say now computers, for example, have no intentionality and then lastly, I speak of agency, which has to do with the degree of ownership of your own intentionality, the degree to which you are in charge of your own volition and all of this will become clearer in weeks to come. Now, especially that last category, that last component of what constitutes a mind - it admits of degrees. Not all creatures are equally in command of their own volitions and to the extent that your mind just acts through you, as opposed to your having possession of your faculties and you deciding what to do, which depends a lot in all, in light of that from humans, not only humans, that the extent to which you have volitional control, to

which you have free will depends a very great deal on reflective ability - the ability to be aware of your own mental states and dispositions and so on. Now, that last bit, especially admits of degrees - not all creatures have an equal amount of agency and I think that agency is such a fundamental property of the mind that we have to admit... that we have to allow for a gradation and if you think about it, the same applies to all biological entities: things don't just suddenly appear in evolution ready-formed, there are intermediate forms, there are sort of stuttering gradations.

So, we have to speak of a dawn of the mind - a coming into being of a mind - these minds would be something which perhaps we should call "proto-minds", something where you can see something of the beginnings of sentience, for example, which means the being of this thing feels like something, but very little actual volitional [INAUDIBLE] of volitions and so we go on through the evolutionary series. I think that there is progress, I think that there is more of a mind if we look at it in those terms. Now, when it comes to the instruments of the mind, if the mind is this sentient, volitional agent then it has at its disposal certain amounts of memories, certain amounts of logic, certain amounts of blah-blah - these things vary greatly from one species to another and we must be careful not to assume, either that the instruments that we use are the best and most important ones, or even to the extent that we share those instruments with other creatures, we must not assume that ours have maximal capacity. The question referred to elephants and to dolphins. Certainly these creatures have enormous cortical expanse - they have fantastic memory capacities and they and also other creatures. Famously one refers to in this context to bats: they have a whole sensory modality that we lack.

So we can become a little arrogant about our minds and think that our minds are the standard for everything, but I have to insist on this one point, which is that when it comes to agency, that is to say when it comes to the degree of ownership of one's own mental states, which include fundamentally one's awareness of the having of one's own mental states, in other words, reflection upon and ownership of knowing that it's me who's thinking this, the capacities that come with that, I think, are fairly fundamental to what a mind is and I think that we're pretty good at that and I'm not only saying that out of bigotry, I'm saying it also in terms of neuroscience looking at what parts of the brain perform these functions and it turns out it would be the prefrontal cortex and our prefrontal cortex is larger and especially in terms of connectivity it is more, sort of, a superstructure better connected to other structures in the brain than any other creature including our closest relative chimpanzees. So I'm sorry if I sound like some sort right-wing, white South African - that would be the worst horror that you could bestow on me! So with all awareness knowing that one wants to sound politically correct, I'm afraid I do not believe that all minds are equal. I do believe that there are degrees to mindedness and I think this applies especially to agency. That said, I also agree that there are ways in which we could be arrogant and think that our types of minds, and especially the instruments that we use, the mental instruments that we have to our disposal are the best ones. Why? Because, you know, compare other creatures with ours and we have the most of our type - that is a silly way of thinking, I agree. Okay, long answer!



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