

**Week 5** Answer to Question 4  
Step 6.3 Ask Mark

That third question about the self as a confabulation in relation to agency, sets the stage for the fourth and final question. We are asked:

**Question 4:** is it possible to confabulate a story that sounds plausible to yourself, and at the same time have a deeper purpose or motive that is unconscious?

There are two parts to that question, I think. The first is: is it possible to confabulate to yourself? And the second thing is: are confabulations - or is it possible that confabulations are - unconsciously motivated? I'll answer the two parts separately.

Firstly, is it possible to confabulate to yourself? Well, in fact, yes - always. It's definitional of confabulations that you're confabulating to yourself. Perhaps I didn't make this clear enough in the course materials, and so I welcome this opportunity to clarify it. Confabulations by definition imply that you believe them. That's what distinguishes a confabulation from a lie. A lie is where you don't believe what you're saying, but you say it anyway. A confabulation is where you do believe what you're saying, but it's not true. So that's my answer to the first part of the question - absolutely, yes. It's perfectly possible to confabulate to yourself, that's what confabulation means. It means a false belief, or a false memory that you yourself believe or remember, even though it didn't happen, and isn't true.

Now to the second part of the question, are such confabulations motivated unconsciously? In other words, you don't know that what you're saying is not true, but there is a reason - an internal, psychological, motivated reason - as to why you're misrepresenting things the way that you are. Well, in the normal psychological literature - that is to say the psychological literature on normal misremembering - there's a widely reported trend toward self-serving misremembering. That is to say, that all of us in the general population, when we misremember - if you look at misrememberings in relation to motivation, motivational valence - on the whole misremembering is self-serving. In other words, it reconstrues things in a way that makes it - makes them better from your own point-of-view. They look better, they feel better. So that's strong evidence, and in fact pervasive evidence, that there is a self-serving bias in confabulation,

that confabulation is - because confabulation isn't lying, that confabulation is unconsciously motivated. There was something I wanted to say about that which I've forgotten, but maybe I'll come back to it, let's see.

I'll move on to the pathological forms of confabulation, that is to say confabulation in neurological disorders, which I myself have studied quite a bit. There there is simply an exaggerated version of what we see in the normal population. Confabulation in, for example, Korsakoff psychosis, which is caused by, among other things, chronic alcoholism, and confabulation in anosognosia and so on - we've studied these forms of confabulation, that is to say, these extreme pathological forms of misrepresentation and misremembering. And there we've empirically demonstrated - easily, because it is so much exaggerated - that these confabulations too, are self-serving.

We did a study of one patient - this was the first one we studied - we took a series of - I forget how many, perhaps a hundred - confabulations, and we asked blind raters to say does this misrepresentation or misremembering - on a likert scale - does it make things better feel better or feel worse from the patient's point-of-view, and they strongly feel better. We then did this - according to blind raters. We then did the same thing with a series of patients - to make sure it wasn't just the one - and we showed the same thing across-the-board. Confabulating patients misremember in a tendentious way. They construe things to be better, or to have been better, than they actually are or were, from their own subjective point-of-view. So yes indeed, confabulation is motivated, and it's motivated unconsciously.

I've remembered what the thing was that I wasn't sure I would remember to say, which is that this question of, you know, is it possible that we can confabulate even to ourselves and so on, it's very very common. I have had the experience - and perhaps you'd like to try it yourself - of remembering things that happened in my childhood. Remembering them. I don't mean having theories about them, or abstract notions about them. Actually remembering events from my childhood. And I then discuss them with my siblings, or my parents - now my mother is still alive, but when my father was alive, likewise - I discussed childhood experiences with them over the years, since I'm a psychoanalyst and a neuroscientist I'm interested in these sorts of things. And it's astonishing - not obviously all the time, but every now-and-then, there's a memory that you clearly have of something that happened, and it just didn't happen. Or it happened very differently from how you remember it.

Why I'm persuaded is because, in some instances my sister, my brother, my mother, my father all remember the thing completely different from the way that - differently from the way that I remembered it. If you - if you try that out, you'll see. You know, really quite heartfelt and much-loved memories turn out to be confabulations. And if you subject those to a little bit of

analysis - a little bit of psychological analysis - it's frequently quite easy to see the tendentious, unconsciously motivated basis for the misremembering. Ok, so thanks for your four questions, and remember, next week is the last - the sixth and last - of our 'Ask Mark' sessions. Thanks a lot. Bye bye.



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