

Week 1 Answer to Question 1
Step 2.3 Ask Mark

Hello. Welcome to the first week of these question and answer sessions which we call 'Ask Mark'. The mentors select four questions each week, and we'll go through the four that they've selected now, one by one. The first question is this:

Question 1: My question is around your claim that first we have feelings. Whilst this makes absolute sense it would also strike me as being incompatible with one of the central principles of cognitive behavioural therapy, that is Albert Ellis' ABC model, ie. that A) we experience an event, B) we interpret the event, and C) we feel an emotional response in line with our interpretation. In Ellis' sequence, feelings would appear to be a secondary phenomenon, which are largely directed by thoughts. However, in the schema you describe it would seem as though thought can be regarded as secondary to feeling. Do you regard your views as being compatible with Ellis' line of reasoning in every respect, or would you hold an altogether different perspective.

Ok, well I would say that the arguments that I'm setting forth are not incompatible with Ellis' views in any respect, but I do think it's an entirely different perspective. In other words, I do agree, obviously, that sometimes feelings follow thoughts, but I do not believe that that is the case in the majority of instances, and I certainly do not think that that's an obligatory sequence of events. I think that, for the most part, thoughts follow feelings. But I do acknowledge, of course, that sometimes our feelings follow our thoughts. I think that we tend in psychology to over-estimate thoughts, to over-estimate cognition. Us human beings are so dominated by thought and by reflective, complicated thought processes, that we imagine - just starting where our own experience starts - we imagine that's the design of the apparatus. But we must, of course, remember that the human brain is the product of a very long evolutionary history, and the relationship between cognitions and affects, or between thoughts and feelings, in the basic design of our mental instrument, is not the way that we experience it today, and not the way that we adults experience it either.

I'm basing my reasoning primarily on evolutionary lines of thought. If you look at where in the brain the feelings come from, they come from the upper brain stem, from a part of our anatomy

that we share with all animals who have a common ancestor 500 million years ago. This is much more ancient than the corticothalamic mantle which is where our cognitions come from - this is a much more recent evolutionary addition. So on evolutionary lines of thinking alone, I could claim that the thoughts precede the feelings. The same applies to ontogenetic development, that is to say to the development of each of our brains in utero and in early life. The upper brain stem, the structures that generate feelings, are absolutely up-and-running and ready from the moment that we're born. But this certainly doesn't apply to the corticothalamic mantle, which is where all the complicated thinking machinery comes from. In fact, I think the evidence goes so far as to suggest that the thinking machinery is guided by the connectivity of our corticothalamic mantle, is guided by affects.

Think about it this way: how can you make any choices in life, how can you learn what is good and what is bad for you, if you have no values system? In order to make any choice between A and B, you have to have some basis for making that choice, and my view is that affects - feelings - provide that value system. They're the basis upon which we make our choices. So we learn how to meet our needs in the world, which incidentally is why we have cognitions in the first place - we don't have cognition just because it's nice to think - we have cognition because we need to think in order to learn how to meet our needs in the world, and how we go about doing that is predicated upon, or based in, a value system, whereby what is good for our survival and reproductive success, in other words what meets our needs in the world feels good, and conversely what's bad for us biologically speaking, feels bad. And that's how we know what to do. That's how we make our choices, and that's what cognition is for. Cognition is for helping us to learn how to make choices as to what's good and bad for us in this ever so complicated and unpredictable world that we find ourselves in.

So, to sum up, yes, I think that feelings come first, they come first in the evolutionary sense, they come first in the developmental sense, they also come first in the, as it were 'functional design' sense, that feelings are what present the mind with problems. Feelings are demands upon the mind to perform work, and then it does its cognitive work. The cognitive work is guided by the feelings, the cognitive work is secondary to the feelings. Of course, this doesn't mean, as I said at the outset, that once we are up-and-running, that feelings don't also follow thoughts. Once our minds start to be regulated by thought processes - which is our mature, adult, human minds - once they start to be regulated by thought processes, then of course that, in turn, leads to affective appraisals. But that's not the basic design of the instrument. Anybody knows from their own ordinary, everyday experience, sometimes you just feel bad, and then everything looks bad. But there's also lots of empirical evidence that when, for example, we suffer from depression, then our cognitive appraisals are greatly skewed toward the negative and the pessimistic by the depression. So even simple evidence like that proves the case that I'm making more broadly, which is that thoughts most certainly can follow from feelings - it doesn't, by any means, have to

be the other way. So, that's my answer to the first question, and we now turn to the second question for this week.



Mark Solms 2016

Unless otherwise stated, this material is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license. 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.