

**Week 6** Answer to Question 2  
Step 6.8 Ask Mark

Here comes question 2. It's a short one, it says:

**Question 2:** how do the concepts "agency" and "conscious reflection" relate to the concept "theory of mind" as used in autism research?

I think conscious reflection here probably means reflexive consciousness, so I'll ask the question again: how do the concepts agency and "reflexive consciousness" relate to the concept of "theory of mind" as used in autism research?

Well, let me first of all say what - in case there are some learners who don't know the theory of mind concept. Theory of mind as used in autism research in particular, but also in developmental research, and also in comparative psychology - that is to say, comparing human psychology to the psychology of other animals - it refers to the capacity - the theory of mind refers to the capacity - to cognize the mind of the other. In other words, it's the ability to, first of all, know that other minds exist - that it's not only me who has experiences, thoughts and feelings - other people also have experiences, thoughts and feelings - and it's the capacity to put yourself into the shoes, as it were, of the other person, and recognize how they're seeing it from their point-of-view, and altering your own behavior accordingly. It's a very important capacity, the theory of mind, for obvious reasons. We are not islands - we're social creatures, and if we don't take account of the mental states of others, or even realize that other people have mental states, it's all going to end in tears for us.

So, that being the theory of mind, the question then says - asks how does that capacity - theory of mind - how does it relate to these things that I was talking about in the course on - during the the lessons on agency and reflective consciousness. Agency is the ownership of one's own intentionality - to use the terms I was using - the ownership of one's own volition, of one's own motivation. So some very basic creatures have motivation, they have volition, for example instincts. But to what extent do they know "these are my motivations, I am the owner of these motivations"? The capacity to own your motivations, in other words to re-represent your motivations to yourself, then opens the possibility of your taking charge of your emotions. So

rather than the volition just acting through you - my headmaster irritated me, I hit him - instead it's my headmaster irritated me, I feel like hitting him. What will happen if I do that? Whoops, I might end up being expelled, let me think of something better to do that will give vent to my anger, but won't result in me getting expelled. That's called thinking - thinking is what the agent of the mind does. And you can see why it's called reflective consciousness - it means awareness of your own consciousness. It's me who's having this feeling. What am I going to do about this feeling, rather than the feeling just acting through me.

So that being the meaning of agency and reflective consciousness as I understand those terms, the question then is how does that relate to theory of mind? And I'd like to answer it like this: I think that the concept of agency or reflective consciousness, is having a theory of mind with reference to your own mind. It's being able to think about your own mental states. So theory of mind is an extension of agency and reflective consciousness. First you have feelings, then you have to have the capacity to say there is a me that's having these feelings, and then you can do the same thing with others and say that he or she has feelings too - they are the owners - so I can re-represent their mental states in the same way as I can re-represent my own mental states. That's how they relate to each other - agency relates to your own mental states, reflecting upon them, taking possession of them; and theory of mind refers to the same thing, in relation to the mental states of others. Ok.



Mark Solms 2016

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