

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 6 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 2

The second question this week goes as follows. I've kind of asked this at the beginning of the course and after going through it and learning what I did I feel that I am more cognisant of my mental states and a bit more connected to what is going on during different events throughout the day. I would still like to know if any specific method or practice exists that an individual can use on their own to change the way they respond to their surroundings and their emotions. You used the example of feeling fear when one approaches the edge of a cliff, but what about if I wanted to feel excited and, if something were to cause sadness, to change it to an accepting of the situation? I feel like I should be able to change my response to my feeling with conditioning, but I was hoping if you knew a better practice.

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So, the general principle... to the extent that I can provide any useful advice here, the general principle which was mentioned during the course is that feelings always aspire to or intend towards objects. That is to say, the only place we can meet our needs in the world, the only way we can solve the problems represented by our feelings is outside in the object world and our cognitions – our thoughts, that is – are the internalisation or internal representations of what we've learnt about the outside world. So, feelings come up from below and we deal with the feelings by thinking about them on the basis of what we have learnt through object representations, through cognitive experience, through cognition.

That's the very general principle and I know that it sounds exceedingly abstract, but let me apply it now to the question that you feel something. The feeling automatically impels you to do something. With instinctual feelings there are built-in predictions. I feel fear. I withdraw. I feel rage. I attack. That is the automatic prediction that is released. Through cognition... that is to say, through learning from experience about the outside world, we learn more refined ways, more elaborated ways, more variegated ways of dealing with those feelings. In other words, we come up with predictions which better fit the complexity and unpredictability and uncertainty of the world that we find ourselves in. We add to, we supplement the instinctual solutions that we have.

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So, to use the example of fear that the questioner used, the instinctual response... when I feel fear, I just automatically withdraw. Specifically actually one freezes or one flees. Those are the instinctual... the predicted responses. This is what is going to take away this feeling. This is what is going to get me out of this situation. But you slowly learn that there are much better ways of dealing with fear than always automatically, inevitably, compulsively fleeing. There are some scary situations which... it is actually in your best interest to face them and to deal with them in a different way and so we learn from experience and how do we do that? We do that by taking possession and this leads to the course that we did on agency when I spoke of ownership of one's own intentionality and that boils down to nothing more than reflexive cognition; that is to say, third-person, objective, thinking point of view. Looking at yourself and saying, I am now feeling this about that, I want to do the following, is that the best thing to do... and so you use [inaudible 00:03:49] world in all of its complexity to think through, is this how I really want to behave? In other words, you take ownership of your volition and you decide how you are going to behave.

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Now, there are degrees of freedom in this. As I have said in relation to Daniel in the lions' den, of course we all have free will. That means we all can... like Daniel we can walk into the lions' den. That doesn't mean we won't feel fear, but we can do it, but, you know, the chances of us doing that are much less than us walking into a mouse's cage, if you will excuse the silly analogy, you know? There are pressures which come from feelings which are greater or smaller and it's not always easy to take ownership of these very powerful affects which are aroused by instinctual situations; that is to say,

situations of universal biological significance where the innate prediction really is the right thing to do. When you're in a lions' den it is very bad, you know? You really have got to get out of there as soon as you can.

So, I don't want to overstate the extent to which we are able to take ownership of our volition, but that really is the only way to do it. The only way to do it – that is – is to be self-reflective; that is to say, to think about your emotions, think about your affects, and think your way through them and make decisions as rationally as you can as to whether or not this is really what you want to do. It's very much easier said than done, which is why there are specialised practices that have been developed in different traditions; most of which go under the heading either of varieties of meditation or varieties of psychotherapy in Eastern and Western traditions. I don't know very much about meditative techniques, but I know enough to know that they're basically derived from the same idea, which is to transcend instinct, to transcend automaticity, to be reflective, to be mindful, and that is also what psychotherapies... all of them ultimately one way or another... to the extent that they work they are based on that sort of taking ownership of your own motivations, of your own volitions; that is to say, becoming the agent of your actions rather than having your actions driven through you; that you are the rider of the horse rather than the passenger on the horse if you will.

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I'm sorry that I can't give better advice than that. I'm afraid this is one of the age-old problems of life. If only we could really take full command of our will and be totally in charge of what we do and none of us ever... very few of us... I don't know of anyone who actually gets there.



Mark Solms, 2016

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