

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 6 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 4

Here comes the last question, question four. In your introduction you revealed the questions that haunted you aged six. What happens when you die? Why achieve anything? And I wonder if you feel you've answered them. Are we spiritual beings having a human experience?

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It's probably apt that we end where we began and I'm also perfectly happy to end on a personal note. Well, as I have said in the introduction, what I initially did in consequence of my childhood worries was to make the decision to study the mind. It really seemed like the only worthwhile thing to do. If I – that is to say, my mind – is all that I have and I'm going to lose it, then understanding what a mind is was the only worthwhile thing to do. To be as fully cognisant of and reflective about and understanding of what a mind actually is seemed like the only worthwhile thing to do and the only thing that seemed to carry any prospect of breaking that sort of solipsistic cycle or being able to get outside of the mind at least potentially see something about it that cast a different light on how it works and what it's all about. So, I did do that. In the process I also underwent psychoanalytical treatment in the 1980s and 1990s and during that treatment I came to an understanding of not overvaluing thinking; not overvaluing our capacity to be able to understand things. It was sort of a realisation that you are a kind of [unclear 00:02:00] and that, you know, you're not in control of everything and you don't grasp everything and so on and so neuropsychologists... I sort of translated that also into the thought or the recognition that we only have access to very limited information. We only have these five sensory modalities which sample the world, you know, and then there's only certain sort of possibilities of calculating with the mental apparatus that we have... calculating understandings of the limited information that we receive. So, a sort of a humility was – I suppose – what I came to; a recognition that, geez, I just... there's so much I can't know. What I can know is so intrinsically limited, incomplete, and therefore untrustworthy. I'll do the best I can with the mental equipment that I have, but I mustn't delude myself into thinking that I can ever possibly know everything.

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And so I suppose that led to the last phase of all of this, which was the realisation of the limits... not only the limits of thinking and the limits of reason but also the limits of science, which is the best tool I've been able to find to answer the questions that so exercised me as a child and still continue to. It's the best tool that we have, science, but science has its limits. There are some things about which science cannot speak because science is only possible when you can make testable predictions. If you have a view about things, if you have a hypothesis, if you believe this is how it works, you have to make a prediction which can be falsified from that hypothesis and if you think about these big questions like what happens when we die... it is the nature of death that you can never go there, test your hypotheses, and come back again. So, there's a gaping hole in the fabric of our... of what is representable to us. We cannot think about a situation in which we don't exist and we cannot have the experience of a situation in which we don't exist, you know, to state the obvious. So, it's easy to see why we have panic about this gaping hole, why, you know, it really feels as if, you know, it is completely uncertain and completely unpredictable.

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So, therefore we build up theories, we build up hypotheses the best that we can, but whether they are in the nature of logical or reasoned or in the nature of faith and spiritual hypotheses, they really are all on the same ground. None of them is testable. There is no possibility of falsifying any predictions coming from these theories, so we all do the best that we can and the approach that I have taken is a scientific one in which I have hypotheses about what I think is likely to happen, but I am also aware that they are just hypotheses, products of a very limited instrument, and ultimately I find... I take comfort in the humility of accepting the limits of what can be known. So, it's not as if I've conquered panic or

anxiety altogether about mortality and the like. It's just a matter of accepting what we cannot know. So, it's kind of comforting, it's kind of interesting to see what happens, and I certainly am no longer plagued by it.

I think that understanding the nature of consciousness, that recognising what consciousness really is has had a profound effect on my approach to these sorts of questions. Recognising that our consciousness is all that we have, that it is a representation of other things which in themselves we cannot know, that we have feelings, which is the way we can know our bodies from the inside, that we have these sensory impressions, which is the way that we can know the world outside, that these contents of our consciousness or this bubble within which we exist doesn't represent things as they actually are... it isn't a direct knowledge of the universe. It's rather a translation, a re-representation of it within the modalities that we are capable of. If you take that viewpoint seriously, then you understand what I mean when I say that one really has to approach all of this with a great deal of humility. Give yourself over to an acceptance of what we can't control and although that doesn't give you a sense of order and a sense of being able to prevent what you don't want to happen, at least it makes you have a rather different perspective on who you are and what you can do and what you have to just put up with.

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So, on that fuzzy old note we will end and I've enjoyed the course very much and I've enjoyed these question and answer sessions very much. Thanks for engaging so enthusiastically and intelligently with the content of this course. Bye bye.



Mark Solms, 2016

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