WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

WEEK 6 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 3

So, the third question today is as follows. Are you not risking being too universalistic in your thinking about humans; that is, social attachment that is fundamental to all humans? How would you account for people who find pleasure in being alone – even being a hermit – if depression is caused by separation? Not everyone is that sociable and needing of attachments. In fact, some people need their own space. An introvert and extrovert have very different responses to the same cause; for example, being alone on a Friday night. This causes the effect of making the introvert happy: excellent; some me time. The same causes the effect of making the extrovert miserable: I should be out there doing things with other people. Can you account for profound individual differences?

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So, there are two aspects to answering this question. The first is to point out that being alone is not the same as being separated. Even little ones are happy to be alone if that's what they want to be. It's… the separation distress happens when you want the presence of your caregiver, of your love object as they call it, and the object that you need, the person that you need, the caregiver that you need is not available. Suddenly… gosh, where is she? You know, then you get the separation distress panicky response that leads ultimately. If reunion is not achieved through the searching and separation distress calls, then you get despair. That cascade is triggered by the loss of an attachment figure that one doesn't want to lose. It's quite a different story to be alone and in fact in childhood we see a relationship between these things; that when the attachment is secure – in other words, when the child feels that it's not going to be suddenly abandoned and suddenly find itself lost – that makes it more capable of being alone and then exploring the world; that is to say, seeking and playing in the world, which is so important for the development of all sorts of important things. So, being alone is a capacity that we develop on the back of not being separated. So, they're not the same thing although they do have a relationship to each other.

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So, I hope that I'm being clear about that distinction, but there's something else which I think is also important to remember and that is that us humans… we are not simple, you know, behavioural devices. We have a very complicated internal world. We have a very complicated internal thought world; the world of what psychoanalysts call fantasy. It's a sort of an internal representational world that is there all the time so that you can be in a relationship with an object – if I can use the kind of terminology that they do – without the object actually being present. This is in fact not unrelated to what I said earlier. You can internalise the presence of a safe, caring object: God for example, Jesus Christ, my prophet, etc. You feel their presence. You feel they are keeping you safe and secure and on that basis… on the basis of an internalised attachment you can be alone and be perfectly contented. So, the two points I'm making are firstly that separation is not the same as aloneness and secondly that behavioural aloneness doesn't mean psychological aloneness; that it's quite possible to be in a safe, secure attachment with some internalised figure when externally you appear to be alone.

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I want to insist, though, that the universalism that the questioner refers to really is applicable. There is a universal need in little mammals – us included – to form attachment bonds. If you break those attachment bonds, you see separation distress and it follows the cascade that I have described from protest to despair. If that doesn't happen, there is something severely wrong with the animal or child in question.