

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 3 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 2

Question two this week is the following: in your previous lectures you said you don't include memory, similar to language, as a core component of the mind. But when we were discussing conscious and unconscious minds some of the evidence you presented for the unconscious mind, like the amnesiac patient refusing to shake the hand of her doctor, clearly indicates she must be storing some sort of information somewhere. How can we then exclude the information storing mechanism, memory, out of the equation of the mind?

So that's a good question and it's a challenging question because it is obvious to anyone with a mind how fundamental memory is to what the mind does. But I would place the emphasis on that last word, on what the mind does. Memory is a tool, it's an instrument of the mind, it isn't something fundamental to the mind. It is not something that constitutes the mind.

And let me explain what I mean by that. If you look at the other core properties of the mind that this course is all about, like subjectivity, can you imagine a mind if it were not subjective? It is impossible to imagine a mind without it being subjective, that's what I mean by a necessary and sufficient condition for the mind.

The same applies to the capacity for consciousness. Can you imagine there being something that we would call a mind if it didn't feel like anything to be that thing? If it wasn't capable of consciousness, if it was totally automatic comatose or mentally lifeless in the sense of having no feeling states. You wouldn't want to, you wouldn't be willing to attribute what we call mind to something which is unconscious, utterly.

Likewise intentionality, something with no intention, no volition, no will, and likewise agency - these are things we're coming to later in the course. Without these properties you cannot have a mind. That doesn't apply to memory. It is conceivable to have a patient who has no memory who nevertheless is there, awake, alert, conscious, feeling, having intentions, having desires, but absolutely no experience to draw upon as to what to do about those things.

This would be a very damaged mind, a very disabled mind, a very unhappy mind, but it would still be a mind. So that's why I'm saying that memory is a servant of the mind, a tool of the mind, an instrument of the mind, but it is not in itself intrinsically mental.

To make the point in another way: there are many other devices, many other instruments other than the mind which have memory. The computer is the obvious example. It has an abundance of memory but we don't speak of the computer, or I don't speak, for the very reasons that I've elucidated and am trying to elucidate in this course, I'm not willing to attribute a mind to a computer.

So what I'm saying there from this other point of view is that the capacity for memory is not something which is intrinsically mental. Our minds use our memories in our own brains just as much as they use the memory in our computers; they are tools and instruments of the mind. The same as I have said earlier cannot be said of subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality and the like.

Computers lack these things. These are the intrinsically mental things. These are the things that make us use our memories and our language and our perception and all the other things. Memory I say again is an instrument

rather than a fundamental property of the mental. Notwithstanding how extremely important memory is for the mind being able to do its job.



Mark Solms, 2016

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