

**Week 3** Answer to Question 1  
Step 4.2 Ask Mark

Hi! Welcome to week three, to our question-and answer session "Ask Mark". I'm Mark. Here comes the first question this week:

**Question 1:** When I take time out, and sit quietly and observe my thoughts, they appear to be just happening without my instigating them. I seem like the observer of my thoughts, or my brain's activity. This brings me to believe that I - the observer - am not my brain or thoughts entirely, but that "I" or "me" is separate to my physical body, brain or nervous system. It seems to function without my doing anything - I can interfere with it, but not control it fully. So who and what am "I" that observed the thoughts in my brain?

That's the question. So let's try to untangle this. I think that there are actually two different issues here: the one is am I - the observer, my brain, this thing; and separately, am I - the observer of my thoughts - am I the thoughts, or am I the observer of my thoughts? Those are not quite the same question.

I think that the first question is a bit of a muddle about the good old mind-body relationship. If by - if what the questioner's referring to here as herself, if she is separate from her brain, she's speaking about herself as mind vs herself as brain, and she says that I observe my brain activity, that is to say I observe my thoughts. But really, if you think about it, you're not observing your brain. We never observe our brains - well at least we don't observe our brains when we're performing mental activity. The only way you can observe your brain is to look outwards at an object in the world. If you're lucky enough to have a scan of your brain, you can see that picture out there - that is an external image of your brain. The mind - as I said at the beginning of this course - the mind is not a thing, the mind is not an object, the mind can never be observed from the outside. When you're observing it from the outside, you're looking at a brain as opposed to a mind. So there's a - I know we speak like this, but it leads to confusion. So when the questioner says she feels that she's observing her brain, and she's something separate from it, well sure, she's something separate from it because she's observing it from a different perspective. The being of the brain is the mind. In other words, looking inwards you see the mind, looking outwards you see the brain - it's an external representation of the same thing, but when we look at it as this

external representation we no longer call it the mind. So I'm going to exclude that part of the question, because I think it's a conceptual muddle.

But I understand what the essence of the question is: the essence of the question relates rather to different aspects of her mind - she's saying there's me doing the observing, then there are these thoughts which are happening sort of more-or-less by themselves, and which one of those is really me? That I think is a more valid question. Now it's also not easy to answer, because there are different layers to the mind, and actually all of them are you. It's just that you don't always feel in control of all aspects of your mind. And I think that's an important aspect of our understanding how the mind works, and I'm going to come to that later in the course, when I speak about agency.

Agency is the degree to which you control or own - possess - your own mental processes. That doesn't mean that they're not yours. So when the questioner speaks of her mind wandering, and she just sees this sort of mental landscape passing before her eyes, and she feels that's not really me, I understand what she means - she means that there's a part of our minds which operates in this kind of freely meandering way. But I'm sure that you would agree that you are actually able to take control of those thoughts to a large extent. You can decide, ok now I'm going to stop this mind-wandering, now I'm going to actually deliberate and I'm going to say "I am going to write this question down, and I'm going to ask Mark. Boom, here I go." Then you're fully in command of your thoughts. So, from that point-of-view, you are the agent of your mind, you are the part that's in control. And I think that that's what most of us mean - we mean this second order reflecting upon our mental processes, and it's this reflecting upon part of the mind which is the part that's able to control our thought processes, to the extent that we are at all.

So I would say that that observing "I", that reflecting upon your thought processes, is what you mean by "I" or "me". But I think it's important to recognize that there is another part of your mind which you are not in control of, and that's what you're speaking about. There also are thoughts which can occur of their own volition. When we say of their own volition, that relates to the third level of the mind which is deeper still, which is not cognitive at all - it's not a thought process but rather a feeling state, and feelings represent motivations, represent volitional states, represent the engine of the mind, the things that drive you. So it certainly is true that your mind is driven from below, your mind is driven from within, your mind starts at a level that you're not in control of. And when I say "starts", I mean most mental processes start that way, but also mean through development - you gradually acquire these higher levels of mental machinery that enable you to govern - to direct - your thoughts. That's this thing that I'm calling the agent of the mind.

Why I hesitate and why I'm being so - sort of covering so many bases in my attempt to answer this question - is because at different stages of development, where "you" are located would vary across that hierarchy. In very earliest infancy, you are just those pure affective states, you're just a ball of feelings - that's you! As you mature, you start to have thoughts, the feelings start to have structure, and then you speak about "well, that's me - this thought, this thinking being". But that doesn't mean you're able to direct and control, and deliberate and reflect on your thoughts in the way that you are as you get a little bit older, at which point that becomes you. But that is the highest level of development, and that's the agent of the mind, that's the part that we most aspire to identify with. And perhaps that's the best way to think about it: at what level of the mind - with which level of the mind are you feeling identified at any one point in time? As you go off to sleep, you give up the agency and you become those thoughts that you, in your wakeful state, think that you're reflecting upon - then you have this more concrete, this more uncontrolled type of thinking. And behind that, in the most regressed of mental states, there's pure affect, and hardly any thinking going on at all.

So I hope that clarifies it a little bit. There's no simple answer to the question as to where you are in relation to your mind. Although I think that there is a much simpler question as to where you are in relation to your brain.



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