

**WEEK 4 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 3**

The thing that I cannot understand in many humans is the constant seeking for a purpose in things. They seek a purpose for the existence of the universe, a purpose for their own existence, a purpose for natural events such as earthquakes. I suspect this is related for a need for or susceptibility to religion, an elaborate system of myths, supernatural beings and other modes of existence such as an afterlife. Is there an evolutionary advantage in this? I tend to think most humans are irrational but since I seem to be outnumbered am I abnormal, is the question.

So the essence of that question is why do we always seek purposes, which seems to be so uniquely human, and is there a biological reason for this. My answer to that question is yes, indeed, there is a biological answer to it. If you think of what I said in response to question two that the whole purpose of us having minds is for us to be able to meet the demands posed by our feelings, to meet our needs, that is, in the outside world, the whole task of the mind is to find out how the world works in relation to this question, how do I meet my needs?

That's what it's all about, that's why we need to know how the world works and to put it in slightly different words that means we have to find the hidden causes for things. We have to find why things happen the way that they do and we have to have predictions about what I need to do in order to be able to meet my needs in the world based on what I've learnt about how it works. In other words based on what I've learnt about what causes what, what the causes of things are. That's the essence of what prediction's all about.

So we seek hidden causes, we want to understand why do fruits and vegetables ripen at certain times and why do they taste good when they're ripe and not taste good when they're green, etc. So we learn how things work so that we can make predictions that will lead to satisfactory outcomes for ourselves.

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Now it's very easy to do that with regards to fruits and vegetables and seasons of the year etc, etc, but there are certain things that it's very hard to find evidence for, to find explanations from evidence for, like for example why am I here? Where's the evidence for why I'm here, you can philosophise about it and this is the sort of thing that we're doing right here. But there are even more difficult questions like what happens after I die.

It's rather an important question, it kind of matters to us what happens to [sound slip 00:02:59]. And so you look at the evidence to be able to infer the hidden causes in order to be able to come up with a causal account of how my existence can be assured. And in this instance we don't have any evidence. In fact it is sort of of the essence of what death is that we can never come back with the evidence as to what happens after we die. To the extent we've died, to that extent we're not coming back and so this is evidence that we simply cannot gather.

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Nevertheless the apparatus is there, the apparatus is there for all the good prosaic reasons that I alluded to at the beginning, these basic biological – one needs to learn how to meet one's needs in the world therefore one needs to build up a machinery for inferring hidden causes. That machinery carries on churning out the best guesses that it has; the best hypotheses that it has as to how the world works. And when it comes to these big imponderable questions we make our best guesses.

And this is what the questioner is referring to when they say we make stuff up. We have all of these myths and delusions and confabulations and what not that are referred to here. Those are the best guesses that we can come to. Remember that when I said our needs are represented by feelings and that these feelings are the problems that we then need to solve in the outside world think about the instance of death, of mortality.

What is the feeling that it generates, it generates panic, it's like oh my gosh, what's going to happen. And feelings then tend towards objects, you've got to find ideas, you've got to find representations that will manage these feelings. And in the case of death there are no representations to be had, as I said. And so we come up with what the questioner has described as myths and religions and what not.

Now it's important to emphasise, I've said why we have a need for this and why the machinery of our brains does this but I don't want to leave you with the impression that this means that the conclusions that we've come to are worthless. They're the best conclusions that our various cultures and civilisations have been able to gather. The only essential difference between that and science is that there is no ultimate possibility of testing the predictions arising from that sort of hypothesis formation. And that means that those sorts of predictions are outside of science.

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They fall outside of science because they're not testable. That doesn't mean they're worthless, I think that we really do need to find explanations for these things because that's how we're made, as I'm saying. Those explanations serve us well then. But we have to recognise that science has limits, science cannot speak to every question.



Mark Solms, 2016

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