

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 5 – ASK MARK, QUESTION 2

I move to question two and it goes like this, I have struggled from the start with statements that appear to place the mind in the category of nouns that correlate with real things as opposed to the category of nouns associated with human abstract constructs. In this latter category I have placed nouns such as symphony, economy and soul.

If mind is positioned in the abstract construct category of nouns it makes no more sense to speak of a mind projecting intentionality into the outside world than it does to speak of an economy, a symphony or a soul projecting intentionality into its external world. Please clarify in which category of noun are you placing mind.

You love to ask simple questions, don't you? I tell you, it may surprise you but I really do not think the mind is different from other things in the ontological sense. In other words I do believe that the mind exists, it's not a mere abstraction, it's not a figment of our imaginations. In fact our imaginations are part of something that really exists which is our mind. It's part of nature just like apples and pears are part of nature so too the mind is part of nature.

What do I mean by that? I mean you can perceive it, you can experience it. The big difference is that you don't experience it with your external, it's not a thing that you can see, it's not a thing that you can hear. It's not an object in that sense, it is a subjective state. But subjective states, I hope you all agree with me, certainly exist in nature and the core quality of subjectivity as I have been saying in the lessons is feeling.

Feelings exist, they exist in the same way as colours exist and sounds exist, you can actually perceive them, you can actually experience them and I know you all have. You have felt sadness, you have felt anger, you have felt fear. These are things that you perceive in the same way as you perceive red and loud and so on.

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So it's for this reason that I say that the mind is not an abstraction that the mind exists, it's something that exists in the real, it's something that exists in the perceptual realm. It's just that we are so biased towards favouring external perception and we say these are real things and we don't grant the same status to internal perceptions, we don't want to acknowledge that the mind exists. It's manifestly, experientially there, empirically observable, but it's observable on a different surface, not the external surface but rather the internal surface of perception.

So no, I don't think it's an abstraction, I don't think it's any less real than anything else. However remember that everything else, the way we perceive things, there is not the totality, science starts with perceptions, starts with classifications with what we used to call natural history. You describe things, you classify them into groups and so on, but then ultimately to do proper science you want to explain things and you want to probe behind the mere perceptual surface and you want to find out what really generates the phenomena that you perceive. And then you have to come up with abstractions.

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Well first of all you use artificial perceptual aids, we use things like microscopes and telescopes and what not to

probe into the deeper structure of things and so we see things that appear to be solid are in fact made of lots of teeny weeny little things with lots of space in between and so on, to refer to the most obvious such example.

But the same applies to the mind, the same applies that is to say to feelings, that when we probe behind them and when we want to understand where do they come from, what causes them, how does it really work, then we start having to make inferences behind and beyond the perceivable data as to what are the laws that govern these phenomena.

And those laws that govern these phenomena are also the mind; they are the mind in a deeper sense. But this doesn't set the mind apart from anything else in science and I think for example of gravity or electricity, I mean you could say these are abstractions, you don't see gravity, you only see its effects.

Well yes, that doesn't mean it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It has effects because it exists. The phenomena are explained by inferences as to the deeper nature of things and that's what I'm trying to do with this course with regard to the mind, it's not different, it's not a mere abstraction. I hope you agree or should I say I hope I've convinced you!



Mark Solms, 2016

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