

WEEK 5 AGENCY

STEP 5.3. AGENCY, THINKING AND REFLEXIVITY

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Agency, the fourth fundamental property of a mind, kicks in at the point that you have to make a decision. Instincts don't require decisions. Instincts are built-in, automatic ways of responding to situations of biological significance. But life's more complicated than instincts can cope with. Therefore, we have to add to our instinctual inbuilt knowledge. We have to learn things. This learning and all of this complexity that comes with it is great. It gives us flexibility, but it makes us have to do this business of deciding, what is the right thing to do? How do we decide?

Actually, here, we have to introduce the notion of thinking. Thinking is how we decide, if I do that, what will happen versus if I do this, what will happen? Which of these two leads to the best outcome? Please note this is not a real outcome. It's an imagined outcome in the virtual reality of your mind. That's what thinking is. Thinking is a virtual type of acting an imagined or experimental acting, very different from instinct. In fact, it depends on the suppression of instinct.

That's a very important principle. The suppression of instinct is what underpins all thinking. Physiologically speaking, we refer to inhibition as what enables us to not have to act in a compulsive, instinctual fashion. Inhibition rests upon one of the basic neurotransmitter properties of the brain. We have excitatory neurotransmitters, like glutamate, and we have inhibitory neurotransmitters like gaba. Then, there are also neuromodulators, nuances of excitation and inhibition.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by inhibiting an instinctual action in order to think. Imagine your headmaster does something that enrages you. The instinctual response would be hit him. That's what you do when you're in a rage. Rawr! That's built in. That's the hardwired tool for living kind of response that you don't need to learn. But with thinking, you're able to imagine what will happen if I hit him. Well, I'll get into trouble, bad trouble. I'll be expelled. The rage that the headmaster caused just gets compounded by these new problems that would occur, I imagine, I think, if I were to hit him.

So I think up some other way in my mind, some other way of getting at the headmaster without being caught in the end, like I might, for example, decide while nobody's looking, I'll go and let down his tyres. So I give expression to my instinctual emotion. It still lies there beneath the surface, still motivates my intentionality, but in this flexible,

nuanced way thought through in the virtual reality of my mind, I've come up with a better solution. That's the sort of thing that thinking is. That's how thinking works.

Where does this happen in the brain? It happens in an anatomical region known as the prefrontal lobes. There are two aspects to the prefrontal lobes. In their lower deeper parts, they inhibit. In their higher outer parts, this virtual, imagined type of acting takes place. The lower deeper parts are called the ventromesial quadrant of the frontal lobes and the higher outer part is called the dorsolateral quadrant of the frontal lobes.



prefrontal lobes



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This part of the brain enables us to think by enabling us to not do what our instincts impel us to do. Interestingly, this is the origin of free will. I hope you can see this is the origin of the philosophical concept of free will and actually physiologically speaking, it rests upon a free won't, the ability to not have to do something that you're compelled instinctually to do. Inhibition lies at the heart of free will.

I hope you can see how what I've described to you enables you to own your own intentionality. I won't do that. I am thinking about all the outcomes. I've realised these are bad ones. This is the best one. I choose to do this thing. It's this concept of the ownership of your own intentionality that's absolutely at the heart of the philosophical concept of agency. This is my intentionality. That property of agency, of ownership, applies not only to the intentionality. It applies also to the consciousness and to the subjectivity. I am the subject of my mind. These conscious experiences belong to me.

Can you see that in what I'm saying, I'm introducing a new and also very important aspect of the concept of agency, which is that it involves a reflexivity, the ability to look back upon yourself, to be aware of your own awareness, to be aware of your own subjectivity, to be aware of your own intentionality. This requires you to see yourself as an object. So the subject re-represents itself as an object and looks back upon itself, which requires an

abstracting of yourself from the first-person, raw, basic experience that characterises the more rudimentary, more primal layers of the mind.

This element of agency, as I'm saying, involves abstraction. And our way of abstracting, the best tool we have for abstracting, is language. Language isn't only a tool for communicating. It's a tool for thinking with and it lies at the heart of agency, of human agency. Indeed, the very idea of a "me" or and an "I" is an abstraction, the vehicle of which is language.



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