

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 2 SUBJECTIVITY

STEP 2.2 STUDYING THE MIND

00:00:00

So what is a mind? I'm saying that it is, first and foremost, something subjective. You can only be a mind. You can't see one. It's not a thing out there in the world.

Now that presents a problem. If you can only ever know a mind by being one, then how do you know whether anything else has a mind? There's a subjective aspect to everything, but does that mean everything's got a mind?

There's a philosophy called **panpsychism**, which claims something like this, which says the subjective aspect of everything is indeed the mind of everything. But how do we know whether that's right or not? How do we know whether everything has a mind. And if we don't, as I don't, believe that everything has a mind, even though everything has a subjective aspect, then how do we decide which things do and which things don't have minds?

Some philosophers -- in fact, many philosophers -- tell us, you can't decide it. It's not possible. This is called the **problem of other minds**. The philosophical problem of other minds states that because the mind is something subjective and, therefore, because you can only ever know your own, you can never, as a matter of principle, never know whether anything else has a mind. So I can't know whether you have a mind, ever, and you can't know whether I have one.

I might be a figment of your imagination. This might be a dream. You might wake up from it soon and find that, although you thought there was a thing out there in the world called Mark Solms with the mind speaking to you, in fact that wasn't really the case.

There's a closely-related problem in philosophy, closely related, that is, to the problem of other minds. That's called the **qualia problem**. Even if I grant that you do have a mind and you grant that I have one, we can never know whether what we experience is alike.

To narrow it down to one aspect of it, the quality of seeing the colour red for me might be quite a different experience from what the quality of seeing the colour red is like for you. In fact, seeing for you might be what I would call hearing. Or green for me might be what you would call red. We would never know.

All the objective things about, for example, the colour red. It's wavelength properties, what it does to the rods and cones of your retina, what it does to the optic nerve, where it projects to in the occipital lobe of your brain, and so on. All of these objective physics and physiologies of vision, even if you understood all of that stuff, none of it would tell you what the experience, the quality of redness, is like. This is the extent of the problem of other minds and the qualia problem.

So starting from all of this, think about this problem. We want to have a science of the mind. Psychology is the science of the mind. How do you do science on something like that? How do you do science, which demands objectivity, on something which is absolutely, fundamentally subjective?

How do you do science on something which only each one of us can observe our own. We can't ever point externally and say, there, that thing over there. I think this about it. What do you think? It is absolutely, in principle, impossible to do that with the mind if, as I'm saying, the mind is something subjective.

Well, when psychology, the science of the mind, started to try to grapple with this problem, inevitably, at the core of its methods was something called introspection. If the mind is subjective, then you have to introspect to experience it -- to observe it, that is. And then you link those internal observations to something else. That's how the science of psychology began.

Perhaps the best known manifestation of all of this was what came to be known as **psychoanalysis**. Psychoanalysis in the late 19th century and early 20th century started trying, in a sort of relatively standardised setting, to observe samples of human mental life, that is to say, of subjectivity, as described by participants in psychoanalysis. And that led to a whole edifice of theoretical knowledge about how the mind works, what the laws are that govern this part of nature, which exists, even though it's subjective. It was an attempt to try to bring that part of nature into science.

There was, however, a very strong objection to this way of doing psychological science. And academic psychology departments, that is to say, official scientific psychology, quickly shifted away from the psychoanalytical approach. And in so doing, it shifted away from subjectivity.

Behaviourism said, because we can't study these subjective things, we should rather focus on their objective manifestations. Because you can't observe other minds, you should rather observe other behaviours. Those you can observe.

So, although I don't know whether you have a mind, I can see you. I can see how you behave. I can observe that. We can all observe that. We can measure it, et cetera, and we can start to do good old proper science.

In fact, there was a further slippage from there. Behaviourism initially said, as a methodology, we must study only the behaviours, the manifestations of the mind, rather than the mind itself, the subjective stuff. I then slip to the rather more radical idea that, in fact, the subjective stuff doesn't exist at all. Because you can't see it, it's not there. It's some kind of illusion, the idea that there are thoughts and feelings that lie behind the behaviours.

And so for behaviourism, the behaviours, the external, observable manifestations of the mind, became the mind itself. And in this way, psychology came to exclude the psyche. Amazing.



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