

WHAT IS A MIND?

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 1 UNDERSTANDING THE MIND

STEP 1.7 FOUR DEFINING PROPERTIES OF THE MIND

00:00:00

What is a mind? It's an important question because, after all, what are you if not your mind? You might say, looking in the mirror: that's me, that thing, my body.

But what if I were to say to you that tomorrow you're going to fall into a permanent coma, but don't worry, we'll keep your body alive. They'll keep it in a persistent, vegetative state. I think you'd be quite alarmed at the prospect because where will *you* be? Actually, the prospect of a lot of doctors looking after your body is not that much different from the point of view of your mind than a lot of undertakers looking after your corpse.

So what are you? What is the mind as opposed to the body? I often ask graduate students of psychology what a mind is. Psychology, after all, is the science of the mind, *psyche logos*. They're often really quite at a loss for words to tell me what it is that they've been studying all those years.

I also ask residents in psychiatry what a mind is. Psychiatry, after all, is the medical speciality that treats disorders of the mind. So the mind is something very real, very practical. It exists in nature. There are even drugs that treat it. And yet psychiatrists, too, have great difficulty telling me what a mind is.

They tell me that their drugs alter the chemical balance of the brain. But I've already said, there's a difference between the brain and the mind, between your body and you, itself. What is this difference?

I think this leads us to the **first defining property** of a mind. A mind is not a body. **A mind is the subjective aspect of the body.** It's the being of a body.

A body is the objective aspect of you. You are the subjective aspect of your body. The mind, then, is first and foremost a subject.

But there is a subjective aspect to everything. There's the being of a monkey. There's the being of a mouse. There's the being of a snail or an ant or even a bacterium. Can we speak of the mind of a bacterium as its subjective aspect?

What about a computer or a telephone or a carpet; they too have subjective aspects. There's the objective looking at the carpet, and there's the subjective being of the carpet. But clearly it's absurd to speak of the mind of a carpet.

So this leads me to suggest that there's a **second defining property** of the mind. It's not just that the mind is something subjective, it's that it **feels like something to be a mind**. Because it doesn't feel like something to be a carpet, we're not happy with attributing a mind to a carpet. On the other hand, how do we know that it doesn't feel like something to be a carpet?

I think this is an important question. How do we come to determine what has feelings and what doesn't? As I said, the bacterium, the ant, the snail, the mouse, the monkey, how can we ever know which of them is sentient, which of them is conscious, which of the may be said to have a mind?

The problem, however, is even worse than that because if we were to come up with an objective or a reliable, valid criterion for determining whether or not something has feelings, still we would be left with the problem of what about the *unconscious* mind. The mind is not synonymous with consciousness, with sentience, with feeling. This, of course, was the great contribution, the great discovery, of Sigmund Freud's when he introduced, over 100 years ago, the idea of an unconscious mind.

What do we mean by an unconscious mind? What is it that makes it mental, that makes it different from, say for example, a computer? I'm going to argue that this something else, this **third defining property** of a mind, is **intentionality, intending towards something, aiming toward an object**. This is possible to do without being aware that you're doing it. There is such a thing as having unconscious intentions, unconscious aims, unconscious volitions.

This leads me to **the next and last of what I think are the defining properties of a mind**. If you speak about unconscious intentions or forces, motivational forces, acting through you, can you really speak of yourself as being a mind as opposed to some kind of instinctual drive? I think that that distinction, that gradation from a biological motivational force through to an actual mind, admits of degrees. The thing that admits of degrees that I'm referring to, we might call **agency or free will**. To what extent are you the owner of your mind, the owner of your intentionality, in command of your own will?

These four things, I think, are the defining properties of a mind. The mind is something subjective. The mind is conscious. It feels like something.

But not all of the mind is conscious. The unconscious mind, however, has the attribute of intentionality. And to the extent that you are the owner of that intentionality, to the extent that you are an agent, to that extent, you may be said to have a mind.

Now, over the next four lessons, I want to unpack these four things that I've been talking about. I want to explain why I think and what I mean by the **subjectivity of the mind, the capacity for consciousness of the mind, the intentionality of the mind, and its agency**. And I want to address all of these questions in relation, also, to the body. How are these things related to the body and why?



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