

What is a Mind – Thinking and Feeling

Transcript

One of the themes that I've tried to develop is the idea that feelings represent problems. They represent needs. They represent demands upon the mind to perform work. Feelings make us aware that something unexpected or something unpredicted or something unsolved is occurring. And when I say that feelings represent demands upon the mind to perform work, what I really mean is that they represent demands on thinking. The mind, in this colloquial sense that I'm using it, really should be said or should be translated as "thinking."

So to come to the question, in the ideal case, in the standard situation, feelings come first and thoughts are ways of dealing with the feelings, ways of, as it were, thinking our way out of the feelings, finding a solution that meets the need that lies behind the feeling. I say they come first in the hierarchical or developmental sense, in that first, we have feelings. A little neonate has no thoughts to speak of. And the thinking apparatus, the material that we internalise, the solutions that we've experienced, the experience we've had of how to meet our needs in the world, this is the thinking apparatus, which then gradually develops on top of those feelings.

Once that's happened, though, thinking can become very elaborate. And to mention just the most obvious case, a thought can be rethought. A thought that has been developed in relation to a particular feeling, if that thought is activated from above, as it were, that will in turn reactivate the feeling that goes with it, especially if it's a thought– and this is important– especially if it's a thought– that is to say, a mental ideational process– which has not properly mastered the feeling in question. That will reactivate the feeling. You must remember that thoughts, representational cognitions, are just an internalisation of our perceptions of the world.

All thought– as distinct from feeling– all thought has a perceptual form and is derived ultimately from external perception. It's an internalisation of our experience of the world, what Freud called the "reality principle." So when we are feeling our way through our thoughts, we are, as it were, feeling our way through a virtual reality, feeling our way through representations of reality. And the function of thought is to stand for reality. It's a virtual space in our minds in which we can work out, in the safety of our minds, what to do in relation to reality before we actually put our thoughts into effect. So there's an important overlap between the concept of "thinking" and the concept of "doing" in the world.

One consequence of this– just to, again, try to elaborate a bit on the question that's being asked– is that we might in our doings in the world avoid certain situations, certain places, for example– cliff faces, for example– because they make us feel something untoward, in this case, fear. I don't go there because I know if I go there, I'm going to feel scared. That's why I don't go there. That's the thought doing the work that it's meant to. It guides your actions in relation to the feelings that arise. And you'll notice that in this case, there's a not doing a certain type of thing in order to prevent a certain feeling from occurring.

And that can also happen purely in the virtual reality of thinking, as opposed to the actual external world of doing, so that we might avoid certain sorts of thoughts because those thoughts evoke feelings that we find unpleasant. And that's one of the ways in which one might develop, for example, a phobia. And there are all sorts of complicated mental gymnastics that we get up to on the basis of the model that I've just described. So to come back to the question, yes, feelings come first. Thoughts develop in order for us to manage our feelings. But once the thoughts have

developed, then you also have top-down processes which, in their regulating of feelings, make the feelings come second.

But that's only in this derivative sense, once there's a more mature apparatus. One last footnote to this answer is that I see the way that I've spoken might give the false impression that the feelings I'm talking about are only bad feelings when I say, one avoids a certain thought because it might give rise to anxiety. One might also indulge in a certain thought because it gives rise to pleasure but there, too, the distinction between thinking and doing is very important. The indulging in a certain kind of thought because it gives pleasure may be another way of avoiding reality, for example, the fear of putting that thought into action— so avoiding reality and living in a world of fantasy.

That case is covered by the same sort of reasoning as I've just explicated.