

WEEK 5 ANSWER TO QUESTION 1  
STEP 6.3 ASK MARK

Hi. We are approaching the end, nearly on the home straight. This is week five – well, at least the question and answer session pertaining to the material covered in week five. I see on the list of questions supplied for me by the mentors that they've produced an acronym for this course "What is a Mind?": WIAM. And as I read it without my glasses on, I thought it says "why I am", which seems like a good alternative title for the course.

So here comes the first of the four questions for the week. It's a big question: "In the first video, agency is likened to free will. Would you agree the two are different, agency being the capacity to make decisions and act accordingly – consciously or otherwise – and arising from causal chains of thought which in turn are the product of brain biochemistry; and free will being a more abstract concept carrying some implication of moral judgement? Actually, does free will even exist?"

So – as is so often the case – in fact there are multiple questions embedded in this. So let me try begin to answer them by saying the simple bits. Yes, I agree that agency and free will are different – they're related in the ways that I'm going to describe, but they are not the same concept. And yes, I do agree – or do believe – that free will actually exists.

I don't think that free will carries an implication of moral judgement necessarily, and I don't think that agency and free will differ in regard to the one being a product of brain biochemistry and the other being an abstraction. They are both abstractions – *free will* the concept, and *agency* the concept, are both abstractions. But both of them have concrete manifestations, both experientially – that is to say *subjectively* – and in terms of brain biochemistry – that is to say *objectively*. So let me now try to unpack the reasoning behind all of these bold statements.

Free will, I think, is a more basic concept than the concept of agency. Free will, in fact, is not only – it's not only that it's not necessarily a concept that relates to moral judgement, it's not even a capacity that relates necessarily to human cognition. I think free will is, in its most rudimentary form, quite a basic property of the mind. I think, in fact, that it is more or less synonymous with consciousness in the sense of affective consciousness.

So let me remind you, what consciousness is for is to be able to feel good or bad embedded in a scale of biological values. In other words "is this good or bad for my survival and reproductive success?" The basic idea is that feelings evolved in order for us to be able to have this capacity – to have some value laden mental property that enables us to make decisions in real time, here-and-now decisions.

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Before consciousness evolved, creatures would have had to have fixed, stereotyped rules as to how one behaves in response to particular stimuli, that is to say in particular situations. So you might imagine hypothetically a little bug that has a rule as to how it moves: if it bangs into an obstacle, it turns 90 degrees to the right; if it bangs into another obstacle, it turns 90 degrees to the left, or 45 degrees to the left actually would make more sense.

And so in this way, gradually diminishing left and right turns would ultimately result in the bug being able to move and not bang into insurmountable obstacles. But it's a fixed, immutable stereotyped rule. What consciousness allows is a decision that you can feel, "is this working or is this not working? Does this work for me? Am I getting closer to my goal?" That is to say to "meeting my biological needs, or am I getting further away from them?"

This frees you up to not have to obey fixed stereotyped rules, which makes for greater flexibility, which makes for greater adaptability to a larger variety of environmental niches. That's the basic idea. So I hope you can see what I'm saying: even in its most rudimentary form, consciousness itself provides for free will. Now of course, that's not the whole of what we mean by free will, and that's why I say that these concepts admit of degrees, that free will also has higher evolutionary forms. And this is where it begins to overlap with the concept of agency. So let me now move to agency.

Agency relates to the ownership of one's volition, the ownership of one's intentionality. So let me explain what I mean by that. I've said that there can be purely automated, mechanistic, absolutely predictable reflexes, as it were, in very lowly creatures. Then comes the capacity for consciousness which enables you to make decisions.

And then there are certain stereotyped situations, certain situations of such entirely predictable universal biological significance that we have built into us: when you feel like this, you do that. And this is the evolution of instincts. So it's not just pleasure and un-pleasure, which is the most rudimentary form of consciousness, but these varieties of pleasure and un-pleasure which are predictions that "this is that kind of problem, you solve it with this sort of behaviour."

And there are examples, like fear. When you feel fear, what you do is not decide for yourself "how do I solve this problem?" You freeze or you flee. That's built into the brain. Likewise rage, likewise attachment bonding and so on. These are evolutionarily learned, that is learned not through individual experience but through natural selection – built in solutions. These are instincts.

Now, you are compelled by rage to behave in a certain way, you're compelled by fear to behave in a certain way, and we have a fixed number of such instinctual responses. Again, it's better than having only pleasure and un-pleasure. It's not just approach/avoid. They're complicated and very variegated response patterns, but again, they are relatively limiting. The world is full of unpredictable possibilities, and so being able to override instinct bestows further adaptive advantages. And it's at this point – once instinct is overridden – that we start to speak of agency.

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For me, the ownership of one's volition, the ownership of one's intentionality, coincides with the notion that you're not obliged to respond in a certain way – that you have choice. And choice at this stage in evolution necessarily involves the suppression of instinctual emotional responses. So although you're inclined to hit your headmaster, or you're inclined to just freeze in the face of a frightening situation, being able to override that instinctual response and then refer to individual learned experience and think your way through the situation.

So to use again my silly example of the headmaster, the instinctual response – the headmaster irritates you, you hit him. But learning from experience teaches you that actually the best of outcomes is not achieved by hitting your headmaster. Rather you suppress the instinctual response and you think, “if I do this, what will the outcome be? If I do that, what will the outcome be?” And then eventually you come up with an individualised solution still driven by the underlying instinctual emotion, but with a more nuanced behaviour. Like for example, “when nobody's looking I'm going to let down the headmaster's tyres on his car. And so in this way I get the bastard and I get away with it.”

So that kind of thinking – that kind of free will – is based upon an ownership of “so I feel like this, but I'm not compelled to act. I feel like this, but I can contain that feeling and think through what I'm going to do about it.” So that's the first step in agency. But there's a further step, and I'm sorry this response is so long, but it really is a very complicated matter.

There's a further step which is what do I mean by thinking? There are two types of thinking. There's thinking with images, so it's just a concrete kind of I see in my mind's eye the thing that I'm looking for. I'm looking for a breast. Nom, nom, nom. I'm looking for a breast. At least I know what one looks like. I've got one in my mind. Yeah. That's one. Nom, nom, nom. And then you suck on the breast.

That's thinking with a mental image, thinking with a cognitive representation. And very lowly animals, any animal with cortex, is capable of thinking with – there is agency in that. But it's not the same as the next degree of agency, which is something that is almost uniquely human – but not entirely uniquely human – which is the capacity to think about a situation rather than just to think with images. It's to be able to abstract yourself from the situation and then look back upon yourself and the situation and reflect on it.

This requires symbolic thought. It requires a third person perspective, and language provides an exceptionally felicitous vehicle for this type of thinking. I want to make more clear what I mean by this. In the more simple situation of thinking with an idea, you have a feeling and then you have an idea, an image, which guides your behaviour. There's an affect and a mental solid, a cognitive representation. But you don't necessarily know what you're doing.

You're not able to say “it's me that has this feeling and therefore I'm looking for that thing.” That's a third person abstracted point of view. In order to have the third person abstracted point of view, you have to be able to think about yourself as an object, you need to be able to objectify yourself. And that's what I mean by abstracting yourself from the situation and with this third person reflectivity being able to look back upon

yourself. So that feeling is situated inside of this object called me.

That's what I mean by ownership of the feeling. And now I – this object in my mind – am going to do such and such. This much higher level of abstraction enables a much higher level of ownership of one's own volition which, in turn – I hope you can see why – facilitates a much higher degree of free will, because there's much more of an overview of what the possibilities are, of what's motivating you, whether or not you're going to act on it and why, etc.

So ask a complicated question, you'll get a complicated answer! Thanks.



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