

EVERYDAY MIND AND LOVE 2018

Session 2 February 22

The aim of the first session was to give you a **taste** of the kind of things we will be considering this year. I touched on several very different topics such as the interface with technology and artificial intelligence and the great importance of art and music for the mind, but we can't do everything at once so those two topics will have to wait until later in the year after we've laid a better foundation about the mind itself – what is it and how does it work?

I also wanted to get you thinking about **biology** – the science of aliveness, of all living things and life itself – so we talked about other animals and plants and I said there is a lot we can learn about our own minds from biology. To study the mind we will work from two different directions: **from the top down through psychology** and **from the bottom up through biology**. In psychology we look at our behaviour – what we do and feel and think – and try to work out what is going on behind the scenes, what are the underlying processes in our subconscious that make those things happen.

Psychology as we know it today is a relatively new field. They say it has a long past (as a philosophy) but a short history. Experimental psychology and a more scientific approach began in the late 1800's led by Wundt in Europe and William James in America and that was when Sigmund Freud pioneered the analysis of subconscious drives. There have been major shifts of direction at different periods, ideas have come along and then been thrown out (like behaviourism, for example) and nowadays, driven by fantastic new research tools, the emphasis is on the neural networks and the hormones inside our **brain** – trying to work out how they affect our mind (an extremely complicated business).

These networks and hormones exist in simpler animals too (and in plants) so they can also be studied in a much less complicated context, even in situations where there is no brain. The brain is not the mind though it is a very important component of what the mind does. Here the aim is to work out the **basic principle** of biology that describes this process of mind – what are its minimal requirements – and could knowing that principle help us to understand the much more complex human mind? The answer is yes, it can. I hope to demonstrate this to you over the next few sessions.

I also introduced, last time, the central theme of the Course – the **biology of love** – the idea that love is a biological necessity and an indispensable part of our mind. That is the theme of my book, *Dancing With the Unknown – Feelings and Everyday Mind and Soul*, which covers all the topics in this Course (even though you might notice that I'm rearranging them to give us a slightly different perspective this year).

The book begins with the idea that a baby is born into the world, alive and well, the mother holds the baby, and that is the fundamental kind of **connectedness** that we call **love** – that's the archetype of what love is, the deepest kind of human connectedness. The biology of mind is inseparable from the biology of love. A baby is not born into the world with an already formed human mind. Each of our minds grew and developed because it was engaged in a special way with the minds of other people – because somebody loved us, in other words. Without love a human infant can develop only the most basic instinctual aspects of its mind.

We grow our minds and keep our minds healthy by interacting with other people's minds in a loving way –now, at our age, just as we have always done. I became convinced from my studies of mind that we cannot understand the human mind without acknowledging the experience of love.

In an introductory sense last time I also wanted to emphasise the fact that we use our mind to **make meaning**. I wanted this to be right at the front of everything we will learn about the mind. It's a very important fact that we don't get our meaning 'off-the-shelf' as a standard package. Each of us creates a fundamentally personal meaning that is not an exact copy of anyone else's meaning, even though it is often quite similar. Because of this we are always searching for **shared meaning**. We search for the common ground. That's a major part of what our mind does. It's not too difficult for all sorts of practical aspects of living together such as what time things should happen and where to meet up, but in other ways it is difficult. The different meanings that we form in our minds lead to a lot of argument and anguish, even hatred and despair, and great frustration trying to understand what other people are doing and why they are doing it. In a less dramatic way we often misunderstand what somebody else meant so we jump to the wrong conclusions or get mixed up in our plans. This is why finding shared meaning is so crucial.

Last time I suggested that you think about your own experience of real **empathy**, where your mind and another person's mind were as one at least for a few moments, perhaps longer. It's a worthwhile thing to do to reflect on exactly what that experience was like, in terms of your own **thoughts, feelings and emotions**. Was it primarily a thought, a feeling, an emotion or just a vague mixture of all three?

More about the nature of our mind – what it does

One thing it tells us is that **our mind does not stand still** – it is always moving – change is constant (as the oxymoron says). 'No man ever steps in the same river twice for it's not the same river and he's not the same man' said Heraclitus who was apparently a bit of a loner amongst the philosophers of his time. So mind is not a thing, it is a **process**. In our language we have more nouns than anything else because we like to talk about things – it's easier, they are definite. Fewer than 15% of our words are verbs, yet they're really more important because they are the doing words that tell us about the reality of life as constant change. So we need to describe what the mind **does**, not what it is.

Because it's moving our mind has a **history**. In fact the main reason we can't create exactly the same meaning is that we don't have exactly the same history. The more similar our histories are, the better our meanings will match.

This **flow** of mind over a period of time means we **accumulate** meanings – they build up, some change and some remain the same. It would be too confusing if we tried to incorporate every slight change of meaning into the thinking part of our mind so we gather together our main thread of meaning into a **story**. We use language to explain to ourselves and to others who we are and what we're trying to do at this point in time. That story doesn't change every few minutes – it becomes established and feels comfortable so we may become reluctant to change it. So that's an important part of what our mind does.

Reflecting on one's own experience also tells us something about **where** the mind operates. Where is your mind doing what it does? It's not just inside your head. It is also operating in

the space between you and other people in this room. Otherwise there wouldn't be any connections made. So we say that mind is **both within us and between us** – that needs to be part of our definition.

We also say it involves our **thoughts, feelings and emotions**. Do these three experiences – that mingle together – happen at the same time? In fact the subconscious parts of our mind almost certainly precede the conscious parts a lot of the time, but it can also be the other way around because our thoughts can influence our emotions.

One of my aims is to draw attention to the special role of feelings in this regard because I think they are the forgotten elements in many books about the mind. I think our ability to feel is not only underestimated in our discussions about mind, but also it is under threat in our modern society – there is a worrying **loss of the 'feeling function'** in the way we live today.

So one thing that we have to look at very carefully is: **what is the difference between feelings and emotions?** Many people simply lump the two together or regard feelings as an expression of emotions so the difference isn't important. This harks back to a long history of argument about what exactly is an emotion and whether it really is part of our mind anyway?

We know that it is because the words we use often seem to be emotionally charged and they will trigger emotions in other people. If I say in a loud voice: NO, NO, NO, and then after a pause: YES, YES, YES, what parts of your mind would be reacting to that experience? If you said it was in your body, then that is the main point that I want to draw your attention to today – that the mind involves every organ in your body.

What is an emotion?

Mind science, historically, has always said the main game is our extraordinary ability to reason, think and be rational. 'I think, therefore I am' is still a prevailing philosophy regarding the human mind. The idea of **meaning** that I have raised has mostly referred to a supposedly **objective** quality that can be defined by rules of logic that are not alterable by our subjective personal opinion. We have dictionaries in which a meaning is firmly attached to a particular word whether you or I like it or not.

This sounds good, but it's not real! In real life our individual minds create personal meanings and it is a biological fact that they're not all the same. When we interact we generally find common ground, which gives us the social cohesion we need to survive as a species. But, beyond that, 'man's search for meaning' – to use Viktor Frankl's well-known phrase – actually occupies a large part of everyone's lives. Interpersonal relationships are often strained by misunderstandings of meaning and we are actually held together by **aspects of our mind that go way beyond reason, thinking and rationality**. We know of them from our experience, but they are so subtle and subconscious that they are not easy to explain.

There are thousands of pages of textbooks with different ideas about the emotions. Charles **Darwin** was very aware of their importance in animals and humans as guides to behaviour that help us to adapt to our circumstances and socialise. His 1860 book *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* is still interesting to read today. I'll be bringing in other books about emotions as we go into more detail.

William **James**, one of the founding fathers of psychology in the late 1800's, first introduced the idea that we respond to the physical changes we perceive in different parts of our body –

for example trembling when frightened – and that response is the emotion of fear; in other words our bodies lead the way for our mind. This idea was replaced by much research during the first third of the 20th century into basic physiological reactions including the fight-or-flight response described by Walter **Cannon**. He pointed out that emotions occur in their own right whether we have physical symptoms or not – they don't wait for us to think about it.

Since then the major new body of theory about emotion comes from the **cognitive** school which holds that our ability to form thoughts and concepts is what shapes the kinds of emotions we have.

BREAK

All these ideas have some truth in them, judging from our experience, but unfortunately they lump together the activity of our conscious and our subconscious mind. With the advent of psychology more and more people came to realise that the conscious part of a mind is actually the **tip of an iceberg**. Our subconscious mind is far larger and more powerful in its effect than the conscious, thinking part. What distinguishes feelings from emotions is that they are in our conscious awareness, even if the awareness is a bit vague. So the feelings are part of our conscious mind up here in the tip of the iceberg together with, but different from, the thoughts. Once they are written in to our story they have become a thought, expressed clearly in language, but I'm sure you'll agree that there is a stage in which a feeling is just a feeling – an intuition, perhaps – that you could not quite describe, yet you acknowledge its existence.

As more and more details were discovered about the various hormones and nerve networks involved in different emotions, everything from **grief to fear to pleasure** could be at least partly characterised as an internal physiological process, even though none of this process is perceived consciously. We don't detect the flow of dopamine or endorphins or adrenaline inside our body – it happens entirely subconsciously. Yet it is powerfully changing how we **feel** and **think** and how we **act** and could be called the powerhouse of our mind.

What we perceive with our conscious mind are the **consequences** of our emotions, which are not exactly the same for each one of us. Following Maturana, I define emotions as the **internal predispositions to our mood and our behaviour**. He likened it to the gearbox in a car, which when it's engaged, limits which direction the car can go – it doesn't determine it, other force is required, but you won't be going forward if the gearbox is in reverse. If you're the driver you know which gear is engaged, but with our mind we don't really know the internal state. You may get some inkling of it after you behave in a certain way – why did I lash out at that person like that? If you are full of anger you are not predisposed towards or likely to be saying lovey-dovey things. Each emotion predisposes us in that kind of way, although we may not realise this is happening.

As we learn more about our mind we must accept that it is very complex and impossible to explain in every aspect. [What a dreadful fate that would be, anyway!] In this Course I want to make the mind seem simple enough that we can grasp useful meaning about the many ways it that affect our daily lives. This means I have to oversimplify but at the same time I must be very careful not to distort the scientific facts. The best way I know to understand the separate roles of emotions, thoughts and feelings is to say that **emotions are all the processes of our subconscious mind**. By confining emotions to the subconscious part of our

mind we can see more clearly what is going on in our conscious mind. But ‘out of sight does not mean out of mind.’ Much of cognitive science has been so keen to emphasise the thinking part of our mind that it has severely neglected the emotional component.

The brain is not a computer

You and I have lived through the **Information** Age, which I think is now waning because we are so flooded with information that more people now realise that it alone isn’t much help. It is the way we make **meaning** by combining different bits of information that enables our minds to operate. Before Claude Shannon from the Bell Telephone Company published *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* in 1948 the word ‘information’ had not really been used in relation to the human mind. But electronic forms of communication soon took over our lives so dramatically that everyone started talking about the brain as an ‘information-processing’ machine – a computer, in other words. Information theory is based on the fact that a unit of knowledge can go from a source to a destination unchanged. This can be achieved by the human mind, some of the time, but it is far from being the main thing that our mind does – in fact it is the least important. This is explained well by Richard Epworth in a book called *Bottleneck – Our Human Interface with Reality*. The amount of information we can grasp at the one time and the rate at which we perceive it is so laughably small that we would never have survived if our mind worked that way.

So one of the things about brain and mind that we can exclude from our definition is the misguided idea that our brain is anything like a computer – it is not. So what is the brain really doing? This brings us to the fact that **the brain is the central hub** – the connector and coordinator – for all the other organs and parts of our body. Most of its activity is not what we are thinking about in our conscious mind at all – it’s called **self-regulation** and it takes in our whole body. We will study it in more detail as the Course continues.

The powerful role of our body in the operation of our mind

A book I wanted to feature today is by Guy Claxton called *Intelligence in the Flesh – Why your Mind needs your Body much more than it Thinks*. As he says: we don’t just have a body – we are a body, as well as a mind. It is us. And it knows a lot of things that we haven’t even thought about and we don’t realise that it knows. A famous American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, wrote a 700 page book about ‘the intelligence of our emotions.’ In our evolution we developed a lot of intelligence before we even started rational thinking. Our being and our doing are really the same process.

This is the field of mind science known as ‘embodied cognition.’ The way we think starts in our body so that conscious thoughts are, to some extent, like an unfurling of subconscious processes. They often end up being a pale reflection of their deeper meaning, more concerned with what is proper socially. Claxton wrote; ‘Feelings are somatic events that embody our values and concerns. They signal what we care about: what gives our lives meaning and direction.’

Another book is *How the Body Knows its Mind* by Sian Beilock, which is quite an interesting read. We were talking about appreciating the natural world around us and she reports studies that showed many benefits for the mind – clearer thinking, calmer emotions, much improved learning – when people had been exposed to trees and green grass for a while rather than the

insides of buildings. She developed new teaching methods based on more body awareness and simple movements. She wants kids to move while they're learning.

Every time you move your body something is happening in your mind. If you were to stand up and walk around the room your thoughts, feelings and emotions would have all be changed somewhat. All your organs will have been affected, which involves your brain as the chief regulator. Your mind will be more alert. Studies have shown that when people sit slumped in a chair their mind is not as sharp or clear as when they are sitting up straight. When people sat in a hard chair for a time before they were asked to make decisions, they were more rigid in their decision-making than after they had sat in a soft comfortable chair.

There was a famous study done with people who had been given Botox injections to remove wrinkles from their faces. It is a nerve poison that shuts down that wrinkle muscle for a few months until the effect wears off. These people reported being less depressed than they had been before the injection and it wasn't just that they felt they were more attractive – it was that the action of frowning had been making them unhappy. Now they physically couldn't frown and their emotional state was different. You can try it for yourself. The muscles in your face are connected to the rest of your body through the back of your brain and the Autonomic Nervous System so what you do with your face changes your emotions. The action of smiling sends messages throughout your body that become pleasure and happiness. You can make yourself very sad by pulling a sad face and holding it for a while.

Part of this body effect on your mind comes through your senses. As well as the five senses that we usually think of – sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch – there are another 10 'forgotten senses' which are explained by Christopher Eccleston in a fairly new book called *Embodied – The Psychology of Physical Sensation*. These include hunger, fatigue, pain, itch, needing to go to the toilet and the very important proprioceptive senses whereby we maintain our balance and move about smoothly. Your mind is very sensitive to whether you are steady on your feet or not because this is a very important part of what your body **knows** and therefore what it **does**.

Next time we will put this all together into a simple definition of what our mind does.