

Minds and mental phenomena: An introduction



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Introduction

This course introduces some philosophical questions concerning the nature of the mind and mental phenomena, such as thoughts, perceptions and emotions. The course considers what is involved in having a mind, whether there are different kinds of minds, and whether there is some characteristic that is shared by all mental phenomena.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- discuss basic philosophical questions concerning the mind
- understand problems concerning the mind and mental phenomena and discuss them in a philosophical way.

1 The quick and the dead – the minded and the non-minded

Two of the most fundamental contrasts we draw are between living and non-living things – the animate and inanimate – and between things with minds or mentality and those without. Rocks and chairs are pieces of inanimate matter; they are not just dead, they are the kinds of things that can never have been alive, at least not in their present form. Plants, however, are living organisms, as are animals. But while plants are alive they do not have any kind of mental life. Their activities include nutrition, growth and reproduction, but they are not sentient; they have no sensations or sensory awareness or consciousness of the world around them. Plants do not undergo any experiences; they are not ‘awake’. While they certainly exhibit responses to various sorts of stimuli, it would be stretching it to say they perceive things in their environment or that they have inner experiences or sensations, that they can, for example, feel pain. Animals, of course, are sentient beings, or at least many animals are, for they are aware of their environment, in the sense that they can perceive, to varying degrees, what goes in it. Moreover, many animals, though perhaps not all, have inner experiences and sensations; they can feel pain, for example, and experience fear and pleasure – at least it certainly seems that way. Among the animals, there are those that are not only sentient but also sapient: they have some kind of intellectual capacity for understanding, thinking, reasoning and knowing – in short, they have the capacity for rational thought and action. But just which animals fall into the category of sapience is a vexing question. Certainly human animals are sapient – we dignify our species with the name *Homo sapiens*, after all. But is anything else sapient? What about birds, dogs, apes and dolphins? There seems little doubt that they perceive and feel. But do they have thoughts? Do they really understand, know and reason about things? Philosophers are notoriously divided on the question. Ancient and medieval philosophers, such as Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), were of the firm opinion that animals lacked the capacity for thought and reason, though they believed that animals certainly had feelings and sensations. The famous French philosopher-scientist René Descartes (1596–1650) concurred that animals are indeed ‘thoughtless brutes’, entirely without reason – but he went even further, suggesting by implication that they lacked feelings and sensations and indeed consciousness altogether. Animals, on this view, are mere ‘automata’, entirely devoid of conscious experience. This radical opinion of Descartes provoked his contemporary Henry More (1614–87), the Cambridge Platonist, who agreed with Descartes on many other matters, to write to him in a letter that ‘There is none of your opinions that my soul, gentle and tender as it is, shrinks from as much as that murderous and cutthroat view you maintain in the *Discourse*, that deprives the brutes of all life and sense’ (quoted by Wilson 1999, p. 495). As we shall see, it is not quite right to say that Descartes denied life to animals; that he denied them ‘sense’, however, is virtually beyond debate, and shows that the distinction between animals as sentient and plants as non-sentient has been disputed. Let us assume, with commonsense, that More is right against Descartes and note that while Descartes and his ancient and medieval predecessors disagree about whether animals are sentient they all agree that they are not sapient. This by itself may seem enough of an affront to commonsense. Animal lovers, however, may take some comfort in the fact that

not all philosophers deny reason to animals. The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) roundly declared that ‘no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow’d with thought and reason as well as men’ and that ‘the arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant’ (Hume 1978, p. 176). Evidently, the arguments Hume has in mind may nevertheless escape great geniuses, such as Descartes. Not only did these alleged arguments escape Descartes, but he thought he had other arguments that pointed to the opposite conclusion, that animals lack all reason and thought, though he admitted they fell short of conclusively establishing this: ‘I do not think it can be proved that there is [no thought in animals] since the human mind does not reach into their hearts’ (Descartes 1985, vol. III, p. 365). His central argument for the conclusion that it is overwhelmingly likely that animals do not have thought is that language use is the only sure sign of rational thought and no animals other than humans use language. Indeed, many people think that the only known sapient creatures are also the only known language users and that this strongly suggests that only language users are capable of having real thought – despite the anthropomorphising of some pet owners. On the other side, one may reply that given the truly remarkable things that some languageless creatures are capable of, only absurdly strong or unreasonably stingy notions of belief, thought and knowledge could be used to deny them these capacities. Consider Wolfgang Kohler’s (1887–1967) celebrated studies of the mentality of apes (Kohler 1925). He placed bananas out of reach of his chimpanzees but supplied them with boxes and sticks that would enable them to obtain the fruit if used in the right way. The chimps proceeded to stack boxes to climb in order to reach the fruit with the long sticks. It is very hard not to think of the chimps as solving a problem by thinking and planning in some sense. The English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) expresses a typically cautious view (with a parenthetical remark probably directed at Descartes):

if they have any ideas at all, and are not bare machines (as some would have them) we cannot deny them to have some reason. It seems as evident to me, that they do some of them in certain instances reason, as that they have sense; but it is only in particular ideas, just as they received them from their senses. They are the best of them tied up within those narrow bounds, and *have not* (as I think) the faculty to enlarge them by any kind of *abstraction*.

(Locke 1975, p. 160)

An animal may reason about particular things, such as the boxes and bananas in its cage, but it cannot employ the abstract concepts *box* and *banana*. Moreover, those with certain religious beliefs may very well want to point out that admitting non-human animals into the club of thinkers is not perforce to admit that they have *souls*. Only humans have souls. But what is it about us, that mere animals lack, in virtue of which we have souls and they do not? Some might say our possession of free will and moral responsibility. No matter how intelligent the chimpanzee may be, it cannot be said to act freely and morally. ‘Soul’ and ‘mind’ undoubtedly have different connotations, as do other terms in the lexical neighbourhood, such as ‘psyche’, ‘subject’, ‘spirit’, ‘consciousness’, ‘ego’, ‘self’, ‘agent’, ‘person’, ‘cognitive system’, and so on. There are important differences between the meanings of these terms and their exact meanings are not very clear. Moreover, their relations to the concepts of life, sentience and sapience are matters of intense debate, as is the relation between life, sentience and sapience themselves. Indeed, each single term, for example ‘soul’, may mean different things to different people and has meant different things to different ages. The pre-Socratic philosopher Thales thought magnets had souls. It is unlikely that he meant the same by ‘soul’ as, say, later Christian philosophers. Some of these different meanings will be discussed later. For now, let us set aside these issues

and assume that there is sufficient overlap between the various terms, as well as a certain degree of univocality among the uses of each term, and provisionally designate this overlap and univocality 'mind' or 'mentality'. In the rest of this course, we shall consider, in a preliminary fashion, the kinds of things that might have minds, the various kinds of mental phenomena that exist, and the relation among these various mental phenomena.

2 Kinds of minds

Let us then start on the questions of what kinds of things possess or could possess mentality, while remembering that the meaning of the term is somewhat elastic and imprecise.

Activity 1

What kind of possible things, other than humans and other animals, might have minds or possess some form of mentality? In each case, briefly state the qualities of the thing in question that make it a possible candidate for a creature with a mind.

Three categories of things come readily to my mind: (i) machines, especially electronic machines such as computers and robots; (ii) angels and other spiritual beings; and (iii) extraterrestrial life forms. The reason why one might think that computers might have minds is that computers can calculate and calculation can be a sign of intelligence. Indeed, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) claimed that thinking was a kind of calculating when he defined reason as ‘nothing but *reckoning*’ (1996, p. 28). The reason why one might think robots have minds is that robots can perform certain seemingly intelligent tasks involving a significant amount of movement on their part and this movement originates from inside them and can be adjusted in accordance with information gleaned from the environment. Angels and spiritual beings have minds because they are conscious and can think. An extraterrestrial life form might be thought to have a mind for any of the reasons already given for machines and spiritual beings, depending on the kind of life form envisaged; it might also be said to have a mind because (possibly unlike spiritual beings) it has sense perception and feelings, and possibly emotions and even a personality.

At the outset we proceeded as if creatures with mentality were a sub-category of living creatures – Aristotle certainly thought this – and mentioned both human and non-human animals as examples. However, in answering the above question, you might have wondered whether it is possible for a machine to have a mind or some kind of mentality. If so, you are in good company, for some cognitive scientists are willing to ascribe beliefs to such lowly machines as thermostats! The philosopher John Searle reports John McCarthy, one of the founders of the field of ‘artificial intelligence’, as saying that ‘machines as simple as thermostats can be said to have beliefs’. Searle asked McCarthy what beliefs his thermostats had, and McCarthy answered: ‘My thermostat has three beliefs. My thermostat believes – it’s too hot in here, it’s too cold in here and it’s just right in here (Searle 1984, p.30). This probably seems preposterous, an extreme and egregious case of anthropomorphising which is hard to take seriously. But what about more complex machines, such as computers and robots? Not just today’s computers and robots, but also tomorrow’s. One line of thought infused in popular culture is the idea that while a robot or computer, built entirely out of non-organic parts, could engage in much of the kind of thinking and reasoning we engage in – indeed, it might even be superior to us in this regard – it could never have a full-blown conscious mental life like ours. It might even be able to have limited visual, auditory and tactile perceptual capacities, in the sense of being able to discriminate accurately among various colours, shapes, sounds and surfaces. But surely no machine could ever experience pain, for example, by touching a burning hot

surface, even though it might be able to detect bodily damage to itself caused by touching a hot surface. Moreover, no mere machine could feel emotions like love or jealousy or embarrassment. And even when it comes to perceiving, we are tempted toward scepticism about whether a machine that could detect the presence of coffee or chocolate would really be having any accompanying olfactory and gustatory experiences. Indeed, the plots of some science-fiction stories revolve around certain robots and computers, which are superior to humans in certain cognitive tasks, lacking the full range of human experiences. The robot or android Data in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is an example. As viewers well know, various comic moments are created by Data's superior intelligence and rationality but absence of emotions. Moreover, it is often said that even the most complex machine is in principle incapable of imagination and creativity: a computer, for example, could never invent anything or produce a work of art. It is not entirely clear why this should be so, but one thought appears to be that machines are governed by strict deterministic principles and creativity and imagination involve the free play of the mind unrestrained by any algorithmic bounds. But how do we know that our minds do not run according to strict deterministic principles?

Another line of thought present in popular culture is that, one day, computers may even be able to have experiences, emotions and creativity. The evil supercomputer HAL 9000, for example, in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* famously exhibits emotions when he is being 'shut down' after murdering some of the human crew of a spaceship. The android Data learns to play the violin and paint. The robot C3PO in the *Star Wars* films exhibits emotions like fear, worry and frustration; though it is not clear whether he is capable of feeling physical pain. The robots or 'replicants' in Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* can feel pain and start to develop emotions after building up a bank of life experiences – with disastrous results. Interestingly, however, these 'replicants' are made out of organic materials, they are biological robots, and are only distinguishable from humans by sophisticated tests. Nevertheless, it is clear that even according to this line of thought, there is supposed to be something more amazing or surprising about an emotional or creative robot than there is about a pure thinking or calculating robot. This is no doubt owed partly to the fact that we already have computers that can perform astonishing feats of calculation – witness the fact that the computer Deep Blue has beaten the world chess champion Gary Kasparov – but there is no mechanical device that exhibits even a modicum of the affective side of mental life.

Machines are not the only kinds of non-living, non-organic creatures that are often said to have minds. According to the Christian religion, angels exist and have minds of some kind, as does God, if He exists. What is the mind of an angelic being like? It depends, first of all, on whether angelic beings have material bodies, for we need to know whether they have any sense organs. Opinions about this differ in much the same way as opinions about the nature of the soul differ. Consider, for a moment, the different views about the nature of the soul. Sometimes the soul is thought of as a particularly fine or rarefied material substance with a vaguely humanoid shape. Thus, in the *Iliad* the souls of the dead Homeric heroes are their 'life forces' and are associated with their breath. The souls leave their dead bodies when they heave their last breath and descend to Hades to live out a bleak and shadowy existence. At one point in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus descends to Hades to consult the ghost of the blind prophet Tiresias, with whom he speaks for some time. There is also a tendency to think of souls as completely immaterial substances, with no shape, mass, volume or spatial dimensions at all; not the kinds of things that can be seen or sensed in any way, let alone conversed with, except perhaps under very special circumstances. Returning to angels, St Augustine (354–430) claimed that we do not know whether they have material bodies, and Descartes, at least at one point, thought that 'it is

not clear by natural reason alone whether angels are created in the form of minds distinct from matter, or in the form of minds united to matter' (Descartes 1985, vol. III, p. 380). According to Aquinas and Roman Catholic doctrine, however, angels are purely spiritual beings with no material bodies. But as the literary critic Harold Bloom (1997) points out, in *Paradise Lost* Milton portrays the angels as embodied beings eating human food. And anyone who has seen western religious art (such as romanesque mosaics, gothic icons and Renaissance paintings) is familiar with angels with wings, faces, hands and feet, wearing robes and holding swords and flowers and playing musical instruments. Similar descriptions of angels can be found in the Bible. Perhaps, of course, these are all anthropomorphic metaphors consistent with the literal immateriality of angels.

Leaving angelology to one side, the important point for present purposes is that if angels have no material bodies then they have no sense organs. Since they have no eyes or ears or noses, it seems that they cannot perceive the world in any way similar to us earthly mortals. For certain followers of Aristotle, such as Aquinas and other medieval scholastics, angels did not even have the power of imagination, for they thought imagination, like sensation, is a bodily process. On this immaterialist interpretation of the angelic mind, angels are pure rational intellects whose minds are devoid of all sensuous experience; or at least they are so until they descend to earth to communicate with humans, at which point perhaps they become able to receive and process streams of sensory information by being temporarily attached or 'housed' in a material body. Indeed, according to scholastic theological tradition, since angels do not have bodies they must borrow unused ones in order to deliver messages to earth. It is important to realise just how puzzling the nature of such a mind would be if there were such a thing. Is an angelic mind like the mind of a creature all of whose sense organs have completely ceased to function, which are 'turned off' either permanently or from time to time, who enters and exits states of total sensory deprivation, like a more extreme version of Helen Keller, who lost both sight and hearing at a very early age?

It is not clear that this is the right way to think about it. After all, angelic minds, according to the immaterialist interpretation, are not only ones that never or rarely have sensory experiences; they were never supposed to have any sensory experiences in the first place, for it is simply not part of their nature to do so. Add to this Aquinas's view that angels do not even use language, except when communicating with humans and things become even more unfathomable. What would such a pure intelligence be like? Is it a completely different type of mentality, so utterly foreign to us that we cannot even imagine what it would be like? And what is it like when an angel, on an earthly mission, becomes temporarily embodied? Does it experience full-blown sensory awareness or is its experience flattened out and 'flavourless', a deprived form of our own? The latter option is explored in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*, in which an angel faces the dilemma of having eternal life without sensuous experience or a mortal life overflowing with it. His desire to experience human feelings and sensations is so strong that he chooses to renounce his angelhood and accept the inevitability of death. His first course of action with his new mortal coil is to drink a cup of black coffee, which he thoroughly relishes. In contrast, Descartes appears to have thought, despite the apparent agnosticism of the previous quotation, that the mental life of a temporarily embodied angel would have no sensuous phenomenological dimension at all; it would have no sensory experience but would simply make intellectual judgements about the state of its borrowed body. As he said in one of his letters explaining how mind and body are related in humans: 'if an angel were in a human body, he would not have sensations as we do, but would simply perceive the motions which were caused by external objects, and in this would differ from a real man' (Descartes 1985, vol. III, p. 206). Interestingly, in his essay 'The Disembodied

Woman', the neurologist Oliver Sacks (1986) describes a case of someone approaching this condition. Owing to severe inflammation of her nerves the eponymous patient loses her proprioception, her inner sense of the position of her body and limbs – her 'body image' – and has to rely entirely on her visual perception of them in order to perform even the most daily of tasks, such as sitting, standing, walking and eating, things which most people can do with their eyes closed. There is a bewildering variety of views, in both intellectual history and the popular imagination, about the kinds of minds that exist or that could exist and little agreement about what these minds might be like.

3 Varieties of mental phenomena

We have been considering, in a very general and highly speculative way, what kinds of creatures have minds and wondering what these minds might be like. In doing so, we have made reference to various features or elements of mentality, such as thought, sensation, perception, imagination and emotion. These things seem to be typical examples of mentality. But what else counts as mental?

Activity 2

List as many different kinds of mental phenomena as you can, trying to cover as wide a spectrum of mentality as possible. (The reasons you gave for thinking various things had minds in the previous activity will be of use here.) After you have done this, group the items on your list into larger classes of mental phenomena (for example, anger and joy are both *emotions*, and seeing and hearing are both *perceptions*.)

Here are some of the kinds of things that might have appeared on your list, grouped into seven classes:

- **Cognition/intellection:** belief, knowledge, thought, rationality, judgement, inference, deduction, proof, explanation, recognition, realisation, memory.
- **Conation/volition/motivation:** will, intention, purpose, desire, choice, decision, trying, action (in the sense of doing something, such as walking or waving).
- **Perception** seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, kinaesthesia (the sense of bodily motion, as when we know our legs or fingers or tongue are moving just by feeling them move 'from the inside'), proprioception (the sense of bodily position, as when we know whether we are upright or horizontal).
- **Sensation:** pain (burns, stings, bites, headaches, cuts, toe stubbings, etc.), nausea, tiredness, orgasm, dizziness, numbness, tickles, itches, hangover.
- **Imagination:** imaging, day-dreaming, supposing, hallucinating, creating, inventing, pretending, fantasising, making-believe, seeing-as (e.g. seeing a cloud as a face).
- **Emotion/mood:** anger, jealousy, fear, love, joy, sorrow, admiration, hate, envy, disgust, panic, happiness, sadness, embarrassment, irritation, amusement, lust.
- **Character/personality:** arrogance, modesty, pride, vanity, generosity, cleverness, wittiness, shyness.

No doubt alternative categorisations are possible and the categories in which I have placed various putative mental phenomena are somewhat arbitrary. They are one way of initially slicing up the mental pie and this division has been done with an eye on the philosophical issues and problems to be discussed in what follows. There are lots of things that do not fit neatly into any of these categories – hope, expectation, wonder, fascination and dreaming, for example. Some of these may well be in some sense combinations of more primitive and simpler cognitive and conative elements, though we will not pursue such an analysis here. It is tempting to put dreaming under the category of imagination. I have resisted this because the imagination seems largely under our control while dreaming clearly is not. Nor is dreaming a straightforward case of sensation or perception since we do not actually sense or perceive the things we dream of. Perhaps dreaming is an eighth category of mentation unto itself.

It is important to note too that the categories probably overlap to a great extent. Emotions are particularly tricky in this regard: many appear to have cognitive, conative and sensational elements. Fear, for example, is usually accompanied by a distinctive kind of unpleasant feeling; but it also has a cognitive component – a judgement about the dangerousness of something – and a conative component – the desire that the thing in question not happen. But it is doubtful that every emotion is simply a separable combination of judgement, desire and sensation. There seems to be something singular about emotions, which prevents an easy analysis of them in terms of other mentalistic categories, even though they involve features common to mental phenomena of other categories. Some emotions, in fact, such as fear, may be among the most phylogenetically and ontogenetically primitive of mental states. Moreover, the boundary between emotions, moods and sensations is probably not very precise. What kind of mental phenomenon is sympathy, for example, or surprise? I have put both under the heading of ‘emotion’ but on the face of it they seem to have cognitive, conative and sensational elements.

In short, the categories are intended to be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive; they are a way of achieving the generality required in order to pursue a philosophical investigation into the mind. They may need to be revised in the light of further investigation. We may even have to contemplate the possibility that not all of our mental concepts are fully coherent. Moreover, it may well be that not all of them refer to processes or events or states in the same way, or to the same degree or even at all. Dreaming, for example, exhibits a certain peculiarity. On the one hand, we tend to think that people who are asleep are unconscious; when they wake up they come back into consciousness. On the other hand, we also want to say that dreaming is an example of our consciousness in action, since there seems to be some sense in which we are aware of what is going on in us during our dreams.

This brings us to a final point. Neither *consciousness* nor *experience* appears on my list (though they may well have appeared on yours). This may seem odd since they are quintessentially mental phenomena. The reason for their absence is that they are terms even more general than the seven categories above. Indeed, some philosophers think, as Descartes seems to have, that the entire mental realm is itself the realm of consciousness and experience. We need not accept this view, however, to admit that experience is an even more general category than the seven, for it is clear that it encompasses many of the mental phenomena grouped under the various categories. Perceiving, sensing, thinking; having an emotion or being in a certain kind mood – these are all different kinds of experience. An experience is an occurrence that we undergo and for any experience, there is always, in the words of the contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel (b.1937), ‘something it is like’ to have that experience. In other words, experiences have a distinctive kind of *phenomenology*. When I gaze upon a sunset, for example, I have a certain kind of experience, a visual experience. If I close my eyes, or don a pair of sunglasses, my visual experience, what things are like for me visually, changes; when I open my eyes or remove the sunglasses my visual experience is transformed again. It is important, however, not to restrict the notion of phenomenology to the having of *sensory* experience, for there is equally something it is like simply to be thinking about things, as the insomniac knows all too well. It is important too, always to pay close attention to how mental terms are used. Some philosophers use the term ‘experience’ in a way that does not imply any phenomenology, any ‘what-it-is-likeness’, and when they want to talk about experiences that do have a phenomenology they say ‘*conscious* experience’. In this course I shall always use the term ‘experience’ to imply phenomenology and use the phrase ‘conscious experience’ as merely an emphatic pleonasm for ‘experience’.

What is the connection between consciousness and experience? This is a difficult question, not only because 'consciousness', like 'mental', is an exceedingly slippery term meaning different things to different people, but also because even if we manage to settle on one meaning of the term there are still radically divergent opinions about the nature of consciousness, given the univocal meaning in question. If a being is conscious, in one common sense of the term 'conscious', then it must be having some kind of (sensory or cognitive) experience with a distinctive phenomenology. To be a conscious being is necessarily to be an experiencing being. After all, it does not seem possible for one to be conscious but to be experiencing nothing (O'Shaughnessy 2000, p. 38). The converse may not hold, however: it may be possible to be experiencing something when one is not conscious. Herein may lie the beginnings of an answer to our earlier conundrum about dreaming: perhaps dreams are experiences we have when we are not conscious. Just what we need to add to bare experience to get consciousness is a deep and difficult question that we cannot pursue here. It is important, however, to distinguish consciousness from self-consciousness. As the term suggests, 'self-consciousness' is, roughly speaking, one's consciousness of one's own experience or of one's own self, or the ability to become so conscious. Thus, when I am self-conscious, I attend to my own experiences and think about myself. I may notice that my eyesight is getting worse or I may wonder whether I am really any good at philosophy. The distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness allows us to say, plausibly, that some animals are conscious but not self-conscious; that is, they have experiences, whether of their own bodily states or external goings-on, but cannot *reflect* upon their own experiences.

4 The attitudinal and the experiential

Activity 3

Are there any mental phenomena that do not involve having an experience?

Though the term 'experience' covers a lot of the mental territory, it does not seem to cover it all. Having a belief, for example, does not seem to be any kind of experience, nor does having an intention or a memory. There does not seem to be anything it is like to believe that Descartes was a Christian or to remember that he was; such a thing does not have much 'feel' to it or any kind of distinctive phenomenology. Similarly, wanting something and intending to do something do not seem to be different kinds of experiences that we undergo. After all, you can want something, intend to do something and believe something all while you are in a dreamless sleep.

Philosophers call beliefs, wants, and intentions *attitudes* because they all involve having a certain kind of attitude toward something; they all involve what is sometimes called 'direction upon something'. One can have various different attitudes toward, for example, the state of affairs in which Descartes is a Christian: one can believe it, desire it, fear it, lament it and so on. When one does so, one's attitude is directed at or focused upon something, in this case, upon the state of affairs in which Descartes is a Christian. This *attitudinal direction upon an object* is called 'intentionality' and attitudes are often called 'intentional states' and are said to possess 'intentionality'. The term 'intentionality' has a long and complex history stretching back through the medieval scholastics and ultimately to Aristotle. It derives from the medieval Latin word '*intention*', which literally means a tension or stretching towards, and is used by the scholastics as a term for the mind's direction upon the objects of thought. The British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe (b. 1919) has speculated that it was chosen because of an analogy between stretching towards and aiming one's bow at something and aiming one's thought at something. Attitudes such as belief and desire have intentionality because they point beyond themselves to something else, and this something else is sometimes called the 'intentional object' of the attitude. Sometimes the thing towards which an attitude is directed is called the 'content' of the attitude. So philosophers sometimes say that the content of my belief or desire or fear that Descartes was a Christian is that *Descartes was a Christian*. Employing this term, we can say that one can have different attitudes to the same content: one can believe the content, dispute the content, fear the content, and so on. (One should always be aware of subtly different ways of using this terminology. Some philosophers distinguish between the content of an attitude and the intentional object of the attitude. In the case of belief, the intentional object is whatever thing the belief is about and the content is what it is that is believed about the object. For example, using this terminology, the intentional object of my belief that Descartes was a Christian is *Descartes himself* – for it is Descartes I am thinking of – and the content of my belief – i.e. *what it is that I believe about him* – is *that he is a Christian*.)

One of the most interesting and perplexing things about attitudes is that they appear to be capable of being directed at things that do not exist. Thus in the late nineteenth century many anthropologists had beliefs about the so-called 'Piltdown Man', even though the eponymous fossils turned out to be an elaborate hoax, cobbled together out of bits of

human and orang-utan skulls. Small children have beliefs about Santa Claus and physicists about 'phlogiston' (a substance once falsely believed to be released into the air during combustion). But if none of these things exists, if there is no Piltdown Man, no Santa Claus or phlogiston, then how can we have thoughts about them? What is it that our thoughts are about in such cases, since we appear to be thinking about, directing our thoughts upon, things that do not exist?

As we noted earlier, some attitudes, such as belief, do not seem to have an experiential component. Some, of course, do: very strong desires, such as sexual lust, for example, and expectation and being startled. Conversely, many experiential mental phenomena have an attitudinal element, in the sense that, like belief, they are directed at things. Fear and disgust are obviously directed upon certain things and states of affairs – we are typically afraid *of* something and disgusted *at* something – as well as having an essential visceral element to them. Perception, too, is directed: we always see something or hear something. Whether sensations such as pain, nausea and orgasm have an attitudinal or 'intentional' component is, however, controversial.

Activity 4

Intentionality is a complex and controversial topic. Before leaving the notion, however, consider the following question.

Does pain have an attitudinal component, that is, does it point to something beyond itself in the way that beliefs do? In other words, are pains *about anything* in the way that beliefs are about things?

There is a tendency to think of pain as entirely a pure 'raw feel', a distinctively unpleasant feeling, *painfulness*. But it is also very plausible to think of pain as an indication of bodily damage, as pointing to a distressed area of the body, especially when evolutionary considerations are in the forefront. Pain, then, seems to have both experiential and attitudinal sides to it. Some philosophers would argue, however, that this indicator feature of pain, while extremely important to an animal's survival, is not an essential feature of pain and that the real essence of pain, what makes pain pain, is its experiential character, its *painfulness*. After all, if evolution had instead unfolded so that a tickling sensation was the indicator of bodily damage, then this ticklish sensation would not be pain. Conversely, if for some reason, sensations of pain were not in any way indicators of bodily damage they would nevertheless still be pain.

Wherever the truth of the matter lies with respect to pain, the distinction between the attitudinal and the experiential side of the mental is a very useful one and we shall have recourse to it in much of what follows. The attitudinal and experiential seem to be two poles of a spectrum on which one can situate mental phenomena (cf. Guttenplan 2000). Some mental phenomena seem to lie close to one end because they are virtually all attitude, as it were, such as belief; some lie near the other extreme, being all but experience, such as pain, while others lie somewhere nearer the middle, possessing both attitudinal and experiential features, such as fear and disgust (with their intentional and visceral sides).

5 Dispositions versus occurrences

Another important distinction to keep in mind is that between what philosophers call *dispositions* and what they call *occurrences*. A disposition is a tendency or propensity to manifest or exhibit something in certain circumstances. A wine glass, for example, has the dispositional property of brittleness: it will shatter into pieces when struck with enough force. But it need not ever actually shatter for it to possess the disposition of brittleness (it may be melted down into something else before it has a chance to shatter). Solubility and conductivity are other examples. Aspirins are soluble and copper wires conduct electricity – even though some aspirins will never make contact with water and even though not every copper wire will encounter an electric charge. The actual shattering of the wine glass, the dissolving of the aspirin, and the conducting of the copper wire, if such things end up happening, are all occurrences: they are events or processes that happen at certain times and have a certain continuous duration. The distinction between dispositions and occurrences applies also to mental phenomena, though not quite as straightforwardly as it does to glass, aspirin and copper. Many beliefs, for example, appear to be dispositional in nature, such as the belief that dogs are not explosive. Anyone who knows anything about dogs knows they are not explosive but the thought has probably never occurred to you before now. Nevertheless, that you did believe this before it occurred to you is clear from the fact that you have petted dogs without a second thought and this behaviour of yours was not considered reckless abandon. Many beliefs are like this: the belief that the chair you are sitting on will support your weight, or that the floor of your house will not cave in, that your car is not made of mud, that Descartes never met Darwin and so on. These beliefs are dispositional in the sense that they are not events or processes that we undergo; rather, they lead to or manifest themselves in the production of certain kinds of occurrences, such as the petting of dogs, the sitting on of chairs and the acknowledging of the fact that Descartes never met Darwin when confronted with it. Pain, nausea, being startled, perceiving and thinking are events or processes – occurrences – that we undergo.

6 The relations among mental phenomena

There is no escaping the fact that want of sympathy condemns us to a corresponding stupidity. Mephistopheles thrown upon real life, and obliged to manage his own plots, would inevitably make blunders.

(George Eliot, *Adam Bede*)

We have seen that it seems natural to say that while it is possible for machines and angels to have intellects superior to ours, it is also natural to say that they will be subject, to far less extent, to that range of sensuous, perceptual and emotional experiences that infuses human mental life – and even perhaps to no extent at all. This raises the question of what the relation is among the various mental phenomena. Consider reason and emotion, for example. It is common to think that thought or reason is a relatively autonomous feature of the mental, in the sense that it can operate successfully in a creature without emotion. Indeed, the idea of a purely rational creature unadulterated by any emotion is one often contemplated by philosophers and lay people alike as not only a possibility but the kind of creature we should positively strive to become. But just how independent of emotion is rationality really? Recent research in neuroscience has begun to cast some doubt on the idea that rationality, at least our rationality, is an autonomous domain that can function independently of emotion. It seems that an absence or distortion of normal emotional functioning can lead to breakdowns in rationality. People who suffer certain kinds of damage to those parts of the brain thought to control and regulate emotional responses often have serious problems making decisions, forming plans and generally organising their life in a safe and successful way. Some neuroscientists think that emotional states, which appear to be subserved by neural mechanisms in certain areas of the brain, bias or ‘colour’ certain of our memories, experiences and thoughts by ‘marking’ them with degrees of urgency and calm, which have the effect of driving certain thoughts into our attention and pushing others away. Emotions may be the wheels of thought, allowing us to concentrate on important things without being swamped with too much ultimately irrelevant information.

Much of the evidence for the interconnection between the various aspects of our mental life comes from the investigation of people with brain damage and mental illnesses. Among the more extreme types of mental illness is the Capgras delusion, and reflection upon it suggests another possible link between different types of mental phenomena, this time between emotion and perception. Capgras patients believe that a close relative – usually a spouse or parent – has been replaced by an impostor who looks exactly like the replaced person. Depending on the background knowledge of the patients, the impostor may be thought by them to be a robot or a clone. The delusion is relatively circumscribed in the sense that the subjects do not integrate the delusional belief with the rest of their knowledge about how the world works. For example, they do not initiate searches for the people who they think have been replaced and do not contact the police; indeed, they seem relatively uninterested in the location or fate of their spouses or parents. The patients’ reaction to the ‘impostor’ can be friendly but is often antagonistic. That the delusional belief is sincerely held, and that the subjects are not ‘faking it’, is borne out by the fact that the delusion is sometimes accompanied by violent behaviour against the ‘impostor’ who can appear malevolent or evil to the patient. One man with the Capgras delusion decapitated his stepfather, whom he believed to be a robot, in order to find the

batteries and microchips he thought would be in his head. Another Capgras patient stabbed and shot both her parents.

One of the most promising lines of explanation for this sad and disturbing delusion is that the patients in question form the delusional belief in order to explain a very strange and anomalous perceptual experience they undergo when they see the relatives in question. The idea is that Capgras patients have lost the increased emotional or affective responses that normally accompany the perception of familiar faces but have retained the separate capacity to recognise them. The 'impostor hypothesis' is an attempt to explain this very peculiar perceptual experience of seeing a person exactly like your spouse, say, but oddly feeling no affection or emotional attachment towards him or her. (This is similar to what seems to be happening to people in the early eerie part of the '50s science-fiction thriller *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which townspeople begin to think that some of their closest relations have been replaced by duplicates or clones.) This is supported to a certain extent by the fact that when some Capgras patients speak to the person in question on the phone they do not think that they are speaking to an impostor but to the real person, the very person who, when seen by them, they think is an impostor. In these cases, it is only their visual experience that is drained of emotional significance; their auditory experience remains suffused with emotional import.

In another type of bizarre case, the Cotard delusion, patients sometimes think that they are dead. This seems to be another type of reaction to undergoing strange perceptual experiences that are drained of emotional significance owing to an even more pervasive flattening of affective response to perceptual stimuli. These absent or reduced affective or emotional responses have a significant impact on perceptual experiences themselves and, ultimately, on thoughts and judgements. The upshot is that the emotions may be intimately involved in the proper functioning of perception.

Yet another baffling type of psychopathology is described by Sacks (1986) in his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and suggests a possible link between imagination and perception. The eponymous patient, known to us as 'Dr P', has severely, but very oddly, impaired perceptual abilities. Though he has no deterioration in any of his other mental abilities (he is a very talented musician), he can no longer recognise his students or identify members of his family from photographs. He cannot recognise the sexes of people on the television or their emotional expressions. He regularly confuses animate objects, such as his wife's head, with inanimate ones, such as his hat (he tries to 'put on' his wife's head thinking it is his hat). He can no longer recognise everyday objects, such as flowers, shoes and gloves. When asked by Sacks to identify a glove Dr P responds with: 'a continuous surface infolded on itself [which] appears to have five outpouchings'. It seems as if Sacks's musician has lost the capacity to understand or interpret or categorise his own visual experiences even though he can describe in strikingly intelligent detail, using sophisticated geometrical concepts, what they are like. But exactly which aspect of his mentality has become impaired or is 'missing'? It appears to be neither his rationality nor his visual perception. Could some of his imaginative abilities have somehow become debilitated? Although he can see a pair of gloves in all its geometrical detail he can no longer see them as *gloves*, the way we can see them as gloves or the way that, as Shakespeare's Antony puts it,

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain or blue promontory

With trees upon't that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with air.

For Sacks's poor Dr P, however, the situation is lamentably like that in which Antony thinks he finds himself:

That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct,
As water is in water.
(Antony and Cleopatra, Act 4, Scene 14)

It is even worse than this, of course, for Dr P; for him the identities of even ordinary objects have become 'dislimned'. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) notes that

We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features. – Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face.

(Wittgenstein 1967, §225, 41)

It appears that Dr P has lost the capacity for instant recognition and is confined to making inferences from facial contortions to emotions and from the shapes of objects to what kind of objects they are. If certain imaginative abilities are required for seeing-as, and seeing-as required for certain kinds of perceptual experiences – such as visually experiencing emotion personified in a face – then the prospects for building a mechanical device, such as a robot, with perceptual abilities approaching our own may depend on the device in question possessing some kind of imaginative capacity. Again, we are confronted with the possibility of a strong link between what may appear to be autonomous mental phenomena: imagination and perception.

The link between visual experience and perception is no more straightforward, however, than that between imagination and perception. While Dr P may not be able to see certain shapes as kinds of things (as gloves, say) he does at least have visual experiences of shapes and objects; that is, he is aware or conscious of shapes and colours. But there are well-documented cases of people who are, in some sense, able to perceive things that they claim to have utterly no awareness of. This phenomenon, called 'blind sight', occurs in people who have suffered damage to the visual cortex in their brain. They have a blind spot or scotoma, an area of the visual field that is a phenomenological blank. But interestingly, although these people deny they are conscious or aware of anything at all within the region of their scotoma, they can guess what kinds of simply shaped objects or patterns are held before them in the blind spot region when urged to do so and they can do this with an accuracy better than chance. They seem still to be receiving some kind of 'information' or stimulation through their eyes from the objects but are not conscious of it. It seems in these cases that there is still some unconscious processing going on which is divorced from the usually accompanying visual experience.

7 Conclusion

We have been primarily concerned to explore in a preliminary fashion the domain of the mental. We have looked briefly at various different kinds of actual and possible minds – normal and abnormal human minds, animal minds, angelic minds, and so on – and at the variety of mental phenomena – thought, perception, sensation, emotion, etc. Describing what a mind might be like is partly a matter of describing the kinds of mental phenomena that the mind in question exhibits. Conceiving of what a possible mind very different from our own might be like, however – the mind of an angel or animal, for example – is very difficult. In fact, it may be more difficult than we think, for as we saw, there may be surprising connections between what might at first sight seem to be relatively autonomous mental phenomena: between emotion and reason, emotion and perception, imagination and perception; as well as very surprising disconnections, for example, in the case of blindsight, between conscious visual experience and unconscious perception. Mind and mental phenomena are obviously very complex indeed and nothing very conclusive can be drawn from our preliminary and pre-theoretical reflections. They are intended as initial forays into the mental territory. We noted two important distinctions, however, that can be very helpful when thinking about the complex nature of minds: that between attitudes and experiences and that between dispositions and occurrences. These two distinctions can help us think about the nature of the mental.

We began this course by noting the distinction between the living and the non-living, and between the minded and the non-minded. It is a matter of controversy which living creatures in the world fall into the category of the minded. It is also a matter of controversy whether only living things fall into this category. Can machines such as computers and robots have minds? Can purely spiritual beings with no bodies have minds? If so, what could their minds be like?

Further reading

General introductions to the philosophy of mind tend to be ahistorical and vary greatly in accessibility and coverage. E.J. Lowe covers virtually the whole range of topics in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (2000). For less coverage but more detail see Jaegwon Kim's slightly more advanced but excellent *Philosophy of Mind* (1996). Tim Crane's *The Elements of Mind* (2001) is another very good but more advanced introduction to current issues and contains one of the best recent introductions to the idea of intentionality. Samuel Guttenplan's *Mind's Landscape* (2000) offers a more accessible introduction to intentionality and other aspects of mind and has influenced my own presentation of some of the issues, as has William Lyon's *Matters of Mind* (2001), which is a very readable history of twentieth-century philosophy of mind. Daniel Dennett's *Kinds of Minds* (1996) is a popular introduction to an evolutionary perspective on mind with reflections on animal and robot minds. Two of the best collections of classic and recent essays in the philosophy of mind are *The Nature of Mind*, edited by David Rosenthal (1991) and *Mind and Cognition* (1st and 2nd editions), edited by William Lycan (1990 and 1999). Those interested in the history of the concept of mind and the etymology of 'mind' and related words in various ancient and modern languages should consult Paul MacDonald's *History of the Concept of Mind. Speculations about Soul, Mind and Spirit from Homer to Hume* (2003). Fascinating discussions of disorders of mind can be found in the works of several neurologists and neuroscientists, such as V.S. Ramachandran's Reith Lectures *The Emerging Mind* (2003) and Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee's, *Phantoms in the Brain* (1998). See also Antonio Damasio's *Descartes's Error* (1994), which investigates the link between emotion and rationality, and Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1986), a collection of short literary essays on case histories.

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