

SUMMARY

THE MIND CLUB

DANIEL M. WEGNER and KURT GRAY



Summary of “The Mind Club” by Daniel M. Wegner and Kurt Gray

Written by Alyssa Burnette

A new take on Rene Descartes’ philosophy, “I think, therefore I am,” *The Mind Club* (2016) explores the importance of the mind and cognitive function in our daily lives and interactions.

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Introduction

How would you define a “mindless” being? Zombies might be the first example that comes to mind (no pun intended) and what’s interesting about this example is that it most commonly evokes a sense of repulsion and fear. Because they are devoid of reason or empathy-- both qualities we associate with the human mind-- we dread encountering zombies. But have you ever thought about how we identify zombies? Short of the over-hyped movie cues like drooling and growling and the staggering, un-dead walk, what cues do we use to determine that those around us are sentient beings? How do we determine that our cats or our unborn children have minds? And perhaps more importantly, how do we use this assessment of mindfulness to determine another life form’s worth? In this summary, we’ll explore all those questions and many more.

How do we Define a Mind?

Let's start by imagining that you're part of an exclusive club (and technically, you are!) It's called "The Mind Club" and membership is only granted to those who are possessed of a mind. But how do we determine who has one? And what do you have to do to qualify for membership? Well, as a matter of fact, the authors asked precisely these questions over the course of several psychological studies, and after asking participants to describe the characteristics of a robot, a CEO, a family pet, and a dead person, they concluded that people commonly associate the mind with two defining characteristics. The first is agency or the ability to have independent thought. The second is the ability to feel what we would describe as "real human emotions" like hunger, happiness, or loneliness.

The determining criteria is, therefore, that simple and that profound. If someone possesses those two traits, we're willing to accept them in the Mind Club. But what's interesting is that, once you're in the Mind Club, you'll find that all members aren't created equal. Rather, they're divided into one of two groups, each of which are categorized by their sense of agency and experience. For example, if you would say that you're primarily defined by your capacity for independent thought or action, you'd put yourself in the category of "thinking doers." This group is exactly what it sounds like; it's comprised of people like CEOs, writers, lawyers, and activists because we can point to them and say, "Of course they have a mind! Look at everything they can think and do!"

By contrast, the second group can be considered "vulnerable feelers." Since they're not categorized by their propensity for action, we understand their sense of mindfulness primarily through their emotional response. Those in this group might have a significant range of emotions and the ability to undergo a wide variety of emotional experiences, but they're less capable of taking direct action. Babies fall into this category, for example, and so do pets, and even some people who consider themselves to be deeply sensitive. However, these categories are not set in stone and they're not value

judgments. One group is not superior to another and it's possible for a "feeler" to become a "doer" by undertaking a new, bold course of action. Likewise, it's possible for a "doer" to be rendered a "feeler" if their perspective is changed by a new emotional experience.

The Mind and Value Judgments

Now that we've learned a little bit about how we determine membership in the Mind Club, let's take a look at how our understanding of the mind impacts our sense of morality. As is the case with many things-- dark and light, peanut butter and jelly, or good and evil-- we understand morality as a paired concept involving two parties: the moral agent (the person who engages in an action) and the moral patient (the person who's on the receiving end of that action). That pairing is called "dyadic completion," and although we probably don't think of it in that terminology, we understand how it works. For example, when someone is victimized through psychological abuse or being hit by a car, we understand that there must be a perpetrator who inflicted that abuse and we want them to be held accountable.

However, we also understand that our judgment of moral acts shouldn't simply be interpreted through the letter of the law, but rather tempered by an understanding of all the circumstances which influenced an action. To consider how that works in practice, let's take a look at an example. Let's say we agree that punching someone in the face is universally wrong. So, if the CEO of your company punched a baby in the face, we would probably all agree that his action was despicable and he deserves prison time. But if a baby punched a CEO in the face, we would laugh and agree that it was cute and that the baby didn't know what she was doing. Even though the action remains the same-- either way, someone got punched in the face-- the difference lies in the level of moral accountability we ascribe to each party.

Because we understand that the CEO is a thinking doer, we believe that he is control of his actions and should be held accountable for them. But because the baby is a vulnerable feeler who lacks the capacity to deliberately inflict pain, we understand that even though their actions are the same, their levels of accountability are not. This understanding is also what motivates our sense of responsibility to protect the vulnerable.

How we Ease Our Guilt

As a general rule, we all feel pretty guilty when we hurt someone else. But have you ever thought about the intricacies of how guilt functions for us and how far we'll go to soothe our consciences? Consider, for example, how soldiers who are otherwise kind, lovely people justify the atrocities they commit during war time. How do they cope with the disparities between these seemingly opposite sides of their own identities? They're able to do this because of a psychological phenomenon called dehumanization. Put simply, if we relate to others and determine their value through validating their membership in the Mind Club, dehumanization works by invalidating their status as mindful beings. After all, if we can convince ourselves that someone else doesn't have a mind-- or at least that their mind is inferior to our own-- we can justify mistreating them.

That's why a soldier might be able to torture civilians in another country but would never think of hurting someone in her own town. Because in order to justify hurting another human being, she has to convince herself that these people are somehow less human than herself or the people she loves back home. If she can categorize them as alien or inhuman in her own mind, she can believe that these people don't think or feel the same way her loved ones do, and therefore she can justify hurting them. This is the "why" which motivates dehumanization, but in practical application, the "how" can occur in a couple of different ways called "animalization" and "mechanization."

Animalization occurs when a person convinces themselves that another human being isn't a thinking doer like themselves, but rather an "unthinking feeler." Although they might acknowledge that that person can have emotional experiences, their emotions are still considered less valid and the absence of autonomous thought suggests that they would actually benefit from being controlled by another person. So, what might be viewed as disrespectful or dictatorial in any other context suddenly becomes just and benevolent when viewed through the lens of animalization.

Mechanization, however, operates in precisely the opposite fashion. Instead of denying that someone else has agency, this strategy attacks our perception of others' feelings, allowing us to demonize them by believing that they don't experience emotion. If we perceive someone as being an exaggerated version of a thinking doer, we lose the ability to empathize with them because we can only form an emotional connection with someone if we understand how they feel. Therefore, when we determine that they have no emotions, we can justify hurting them. A great example of mechanization in practice can be seen through propaganda from World War II, in which the US depicted the Japanese as unfeeling automatons who relentlessly prepared for attack without experiencing normal human things like exhaustion, hunger, or a desire for human connection.

The Intent Behind the Event

Whenever anything happens, we want to know. Whether an event is good or bad, it's our natural inclination to question how something came about. And in our efforts to make sense of the world, we often come up with explanations that can help to restore a sense of meaning to our existence, like saying that something happened because it was God's will or fate or part of a higher purpose. But the truth is that whether we're dealing with human beings or unseen forces of the universe, it's often impossible to tell whether something was done by an intentional doer or simply occurred through an agent of change.

For example, just think about sleepwalkers. Because sleepwalkers are human beings with minds and agency of their own, our instinctive assumption is to say that they know what they're doing and they're responsible for it. But if we look at the case of Kenneth Parks, a mild-mannered young man with no history of violence who killed his mother-in-law while sleepwalking, we might have to alter our assumptions. It's difficult to accept that someone could have no knowledge of committing a violent crime or that they could do so without malicious intent, but brain scans and the testimony of sleep specialists who could attest to Parks' atypical brain activity at the time of the murder proved it. Fortunately for him, Parks was acquitted, and fortunately for us, we have a perfect example of why we can't always assume that someone is acting intentionally or that they're responsible for their actions.

However, that's not to say that we should stop searching for meaning in everyday life. In fact, that intrinsic curiosity and our predisposition to assume that people act intentionally is very beneficial for us because that assumption can keep us safe and help us stay alert. For example, if you're alone in the jungle and you hear the weeds rustling behind you, you might assume that a lion-- a being with a mind and a sense of agency-- is stalking you and you're in danger. Even if you're wrong and that noise is caused by something without intentionality-- like the grass simply blowing in the

breeze-- your predisposition to assume that actions are caused by mindful beings is still a useful survival skill.

Our Perception of the Mind

So, by this point, we can safely say that pretty much everyone agrees on a few basic principles. We agree that a mind is determined by one's capacity for independent thought and action. We agree that all adult humans have minds and are responsible for their actions and that babies have minds as well, even if they're more likely to be classed as vulnerable feelers rather than thinking doers. It should also be universally accepted that, although we sometimes use strategies like dehumanization or mechanization to justify hurting others or ease our guilty conscience, both of these ideas are incorrect; all human beings have thoughts and emotions and all are deserving of respect.

But what about those whose membership in the Mind Club is a bit more tenuous? Those who belong to a slightly more divisive class than your typical thinking doers and vulnerable feelers? The members of this group are called "cryptominds" and their status in the Mind Club is relegated by some pretty restrictive gatekeepers. Cryptominds include beings like God, animals, robots, and people who are dead or permanently unconscious. The debate over the validity of cryptominds' membership in the Mind Club arose because we don't know what to do with those who don't fit into the typical categories we use to define beings who have minds. How do we explain, for example, the fact that Google has an immense wealth of knowledge but lacks the ability to think for itself or have an emotional experience? Does that mean Google does or does not have a mind?

Similarly, how do we categorize a baby mouse or someone who is in a permanent vegetative state? We know that both of these beings are vulnerable feelers and they can experience physical or emotional sensations, but they're also not capable of much in the way of independent action. Does that mean they don't have minds? And, perhaps more importantly, what is our standard for testing whether or not someone has a mind? Who makes that decision? The authors posit that, quite simply, something has a mind if we perceive it as having one. This theory is backed

by the research of British mathematician Alan Turing who developed the Turing Test in 1950. The purpose of his test was to determine whether or not a machine has a mind, but this principle can be applied to any entity whose Mind Club membership is in question.

The Turing Test asks a person to swap text-based messages with both a human and a computer and then decide which of his conversation partners was a real person. Turing argued that this was a valid test because, if a computer can communicate so effectively as to convince a person that it is, in fact, another human being, it should be considered to have a mind. And because any mind is only real to us so long as we perceive it as being real, the Turing Test remains our standard for admitting cryptominds into the Mind Club. However, because it is perception-based, this test should come with the caveat that perhaps the computer could convince some people and not others. This means that our understanding of what constitutes a mind is more subjective than we might realize, and as such, there's only one mind that you can ever really be sure of: your own. And because that's the mind that's most real to you, that means your membership in the Mind Club is a lot more personal-- and exclusive!-- than you might think.

Final Summary

We assume that other people and most animals have minds and this assumption guides our everyday interactions, our sense of morality, and our understanding of how to treat others. However, it's important to remember that our understanding of the mind is simply a matter of perception and, whether we consciously think about it this way or not, the way we view another being's mind is determined by their capacity for agency and experience. Because of this, our understanding of the mind is highly subjective and can lead to disagreements about who does or does not have a mind. Given that these determinations can have significant repercussions in the lives of others, we should make our assessments carefully and with a great deal of thought.



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