

What is the Mind-Body Problem?: Marvin Minsky

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Transcript - Short

Marvin Minsky:

One thing we know about computers is it doesn't matter what they're made of as long as they have same processes. So, once, some of my students made a machine that played tic-tac-toe out of sticks and spools and pieces of strings. And it played a perfect game of tic-tac-toe and that was fine and we could make a computer do the same thing. But if the parts are interrelated by the same functions, then the things should have the same behavior.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But the fundamental question is: no matter how complicated you make your computer with even more parallel processes than the brain has, however long into the future, will that machine have the same internal experiences that a human being does? That's the key question.

Marvin Minsky:

Well of course it will, because experience is a process. And if you take a particular experience, if you knew how to describe the mental processes, what are their parts, how are they related, how does it go from one state or another? You would have described all the details of that experience. What's the mystery?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, there are many people who think that that is the great mystery, that this is the core piece of evidence that shows there's something extra, some soul, that we need to inject to make a human consciousness, that you need to marry some sort of a non-physical thing with a physical thing.

Marvin Minsky:

That sounds just plain silly, because how does a soul help? Unless you tell me what are a soul's part and how do they work, you haven't answered anything. All you've done is provided a word to keep you from thinking about the hard question, mainly how does – when I see something red, you could – some philosophers say, well that's very mysterious because there's – there's redness and we can't explain it. And there isn't any redness. There's a very complicated process that goes on in many different parts of the brain when you see red. It varies from one person to another. And it seems to me adding a soul to do that, that just sounds like an insult. I've got 50 billion synapses and, uh, a 150 trillion. The people who talk about a soul are just people who are too ignorant or unambitious or lazy or I don't know what insults to hurl at them to say, this is a really hard question. It's all very well to say it can't be answered. You say, this is an unambitious, faith-ridden person. When you know that your science is too weak to make any progress, so you make this new thing – you could call it a God – and then you say it's rude to ask how God works. It's rude to ask what are the parts of the soul? To me it's sort of like, suppose we had a primitive culture, if there is such a thing, and we brought it to the city and we say, well we're on the fifth floor, and you press the elevator button. And the – this person, a very sensible thing to do is to believe, well there's something in the elevator button that's the essential – essence of transportation. And that's what makes all this other stuff work.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, how – how then can people use the soul? And why do they keep coming back to it?

Marvin Minsky:

I think when you don't know something, you can think about it, but sometimes you have an intuition that it's hopeless, that you're not smart enough, or there's no answer, or you'll never know because some hostile spirit or force is going to keep you from this knowledge. And then it's good to invent a word like God or good or whatever that saves you time from thinking about it.