What is the Mind-Body Problem?: John Searle

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
John, the mind/body problem – what is the relationship between what I think is my mind and what I know is my brain has been the question that has – I've asked myself since a preteen. And indeed I did my doctorate in brain research trying to answer that question because when I took philosophy, I was just overwhelmed with all of these different solutions and words and ideas that – that – that – that just seemed overwhelming. I come to you to ask about the mind/body problem. Let's define it. Let's – let's discuss its history, and what some of the solutions supposedly are.

John Searle:
Okay, well, you've already given a good characterization of what the problem is. What's the relationship between the mental and the physical, specifically what's the relationship between my mental processes and the brain? And there are a whole lot of different views and a whole lot of different mistakes to be made. The two broad schemes that attract most people are either dualism, that mind is something totally different from the – from the body and the brain. Or materialism that says there isn't anything extra. It all just reduces to the brain. Now the problem with those is they're both trying to say something true. It's just they end up saying something false. And the trick is to try to preserve that true part. The – that – the materialist says, look, reality is ultimately physical particles and feelings of force. That's right. But then the materialist denies the irreducibility and existence of the mental. The dualist grants the irreducibility and existence of the mental, but then it says it's not part of the physical world. Now if – if that's the set of parameters, then we're off and running. And you asked me to name some of the horses in this race, so let me just name a few of them. Most philosophers are materialists of some kind or another because they just think dualism fails. Well, three hundred years or two thousand years of failure, depending on how far back you want to go. And the – for a long time, the most fashionable form of materialism was behaviorism. The idea, well that's really all there is to having a mind is just behaving in a certain way. But the problem –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Because that's – that's science. We know if we can look at something – the behavior of something, we know that's realism.

John Searle:
Realism, yeah.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Anything else is just airy-fairy stuff.

John Searle:
That's right. It looks like behaviorism is – is the way to go. But the problem is nobody can ever be a behaviorist about himself. I mean I can't think, oh well, I – when I pinch myself, the only thing that goes on is my verbal behavior and the behavior. I actually have a feeling. And so behavior really is implausible and – but its failure led to, what a lot of people think is, a more plausible view, and that's functionalism. Functionalism says, think of the mind. Not of some mysterious inner-processes, but just think of it as a set of causal mechanisms that enables the body to function. So we have, I think, input stimulus and – and then, unlike behaviorism, we then postulate – but there's something going on inside. And what goes on inside is a mechanism that produces outside behavior.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Now this got stronger with the – the development of computers –

John Searle:
Exactly.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
– because now you have computational, computational functionalism, doing the same kinds of things in different, in different substrates.

John Searle:
Yeah. No this is – and – that functionalism naturally leads to people to ask the question: What's the nature of the inner mechanism that produces the outward behavior? And at this point there was – this happened really, well I guess in the – in the '60s and '70s, there was a wonderful sense of possibility when people realized, my God, we know the mechanism. It's a digital computer. The brain is a digital computer. And there was an equation that was printed in a whole lot of text books that said, mind is to brain as program is to hardware. The mind, when we think of the mind –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Software to hardware, yeah.

John Searle:
– so it's as software is to hardware. I – that – that the mind is – is just the program that happens to be running, or set of programs that happen to be running, in the brain. And you've hinted at one of the appealing features of this, namely, the hardware doesn't matter.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Matter, yeah.

John Searle:
We have what's called multiple realizability. The same program can be realized in any number of different computers and the – the idea was, well why don't we just get the right programs running in our computers and we will have created a mind. Now, I – that view – I say it with some discomfort because it's preposterous. But I – and there's a simple refutation, which I gave years ago. It's called a Chinese Room Argument. And what it says is, look, if that were right then I could have any cognitive capacity I don't have just by running the computer program for that cognitive capacity. I don't – I don't understand Chinese, but if you gave me questions in Chinese and I look up the program – answers I'm supposed to give back and I could give back all the same, I wouldn't understand Chinese even if I did have the right behavior and the right input/output mechanism. So computer functionalism fails. But then, if that fails, then there are all these other horses in the race. Another one is to say, well, maybe the mind exists alright, but it doesn't make any difference to our lives. And this is called epiphenomenalism. The mind is just a kind of a – a froth on the wave. And if I was the froth on the wave, I might think, tough job to bring these waves on the beach and taking them out. But in fact we know that it's just going along for the ride. It doesn't actually make any difference. That's a desperate move.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Yeah, and that is actually what's called property dualism because in dualism, it – it's embedded that there's substance dualism where there's really some other kind of mysterious stuff.

John Searle:
Yeah.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
And that's the typical, religious, maybe, background. But then there's property dualism.

John Searle:
Right, and I think that a lot of dualists are embarrassed by substance dualism, which says, reality divides into two radically different kinds of substances: mental substances, our souls, and physical substances, or bodies. And that's pretty hard to stomach in this day and age. But a lot of people adopt a weaker version of that and say, well mental states really are irreducible to physical states. They're real, okay, but they're not separate entities. They're just features. They're just a separate kind of property of – of the reality that has got these two different sorts of properties: mental properties and physical properties.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
And in that case, the mental would be this epiphenomena because it – it's the one, the froth on the wave floating along, thinks it's doing something but it really isn't.

John Searle:
Property dualism doesn't strictly imply epiphenomenalism, but in reality, most property dualists that I know wind up as epiphenomenalists because, okay, you've got these mental states. But if the cause – if the world is causally closed, if a physical world is causally closed, nothing outside it can ever interfere. And the property dualists says there are these properties that are outside the physical world, then it looks like you're – you're stuck with it, epiphenomenalism. Now that's an incredible view. I cannot imagine being an epiphenomenalist. Think of it. You're forced to say, no one in the history of the universe ever drank because he was thirsty or ate because he was hungry or behaved angrily because he felt angry. It's all a massive illusion. And – and – I just can't imagine believing that, but anyway, there are some other crazier views.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
You know, we're talking about crazy views. I mean we – we – we're leaving out another extreme, which is idealism. Some people would say that the – there is only one thing, but it's the mind.

John Searle:
That's right, to hell with it there. Well let me mention two other views. I mean since we're getting off this sort of rogue's gallery of philosophical theories here. One that had an amazing influence for a long period of time is idealism that says, all reality is mental. That what we think of as physical is just an aspect of the mental. It's just part of our mental states, that sometimes we seem to be perceiving chairs and tables and mountains and molecules, but in fact those are just aspects of mental reality. And the most extreme version of that was called absolute idealism. There's one great big mind, the absolute. And each of us is a tiny fragment of this hell of a great big mind. Now I, again, I can't say this without a certain amount of embarrassment, because I can't imagine believing that, but – but as I said was a very influential view – well, from – for most of the 19th Century, I think it was very influential. It was only in the 20th Century, I don't know many absolute idealists running around anymore, but there is a – a view, which is almost as implausible, and that's called panpsychism.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Oh.

John Searle:
And I actually have friends who describe themselves as panpsychists. And what the panpsychists maintain is that, well the mind really is everywhere. That's true that the chair doesn't have my kind of consciousness, but there is a kind of chair consciousness that it has. And so consc – we should think of consciousness as really pervading all of – of reality.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Well, you know, this is an extraordinary idea that – that on its surface seems absurd. But I have to look at it more seriously because some very smart people – friends of mine, too, by the way – you know, believe that. In fact, if anything, there seems to be more people believing that than less.

John Searle:
Yeah, yeah. Now I'll tell you the problem, one of the many problems with it, is – I mean apart from its initial implausibility, that every time I hit the chair I may be causing it pain – but –
Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
No, I think they would say that you – you need to have some – some aspect of consciousness in every atom more than in a proto-conscious way because consciousness – it – it – it’s a – a – a – a – a statement to the remarkable nature of consciousness. That it’s something so unique, so different than everything else that’s in the physical world, that every attempt to explain it seems to have failed. It’s the only thing we have left.

John Searle:
Yes. Well let me give you a simplest refutation of it, and that’s this: consciousness by its very nature comes in unified wholes. That is, my con – we can’t take your conscious and mine and sort of put them together in a bucket to make one great big consciousness. There’s your consciousness and my consciousness. But now, if we’re going to say consciousness is everywhere, what is the principle of the division that separates one conscious entity from another. If I say the chair’s conscious, how about the legs of the chair? Are they conscious, too? Is there separate consciousness from the consciousness of the chair? What about each of the molecules? Are the molecules conscious? Now the temptation I think at that point is say, well, they have protoconsciousness, or something like that. But what’s that supposed to mean? I mean we – we all understand consciousness. We understand this, what I have now with these qualitative subjective states of feeling, our sentence, our awareness. Now if I’m supposed to say that’s everywhere, then how do I preserve the – this essential feature of consciousness, that it comes in unified wholes? That – that – all of – you see, I don’t just have my thirst in my mouth and the sound of my voice and the weight of my body against the chair. But I have all of those as part of a single, unified conscious field.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
John, here’s what I find astonishing. On the one hand, we have philosophers, smart people, saying exactly what you said about panpsychism, that it’s everywhere. On the other hand, even more, we have – we have materialists who want to eliminate consciousness as something that eliminative materialism. I mean, you can’t have more extremes. What is it about consciousness that forces people to these extreme kinds of positions? What is it about it?

John Searle:
Yes, where the problem – the problem with consciousness. The reason that it makes it such a – a difficult problem in philosophy is a – two – two features. One is we don’t know how to assimilate it to our overall scientific world view. And that leads people to think these are the materials. Well it doesn’t exist. It’s an illusion. It’s crazy, because if I have the illusion that I’m conscious, then I am conscious. On the other hand, it – it leads people to say, well if it really exists, then there’s no way we can account for its existence without supposing that it’s everywhere. But the – but the second reason, aside from our – how to make it square with our scientific world view, is we have this tradition, with this religious philosophical cultural tradition, that says, our consciousness is not a part of the ordinary physical world. On the contrary, it’s special. It’s what makes me me. It is the very nature of myself that I am this continuing conscious entity. So that’s why I think consciousness is a – is such a hard problem. It’s such an overwhelming problem. And then of course there’s a third reason, and that is we really don’t know how the brain works. If we really had a full understanding of how the brain produces consciousness and where and how it’s realized in the brain and how it functions causally, then I think this problem would disappear. We would no longer feel this urge to postulate that as something mysterious.