What is the Mind-Body Problem?: John Searle

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Transcript - Short

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. Let's define it, let's discuss its history, and what some of the solutions supposedly are.

John Searle:
Okay. The two broad schemes that attract most people are either dualism, that the 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. 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 materialist says, look, reality is ultimately physical particles and fields 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. Most philosophers are materialists of some kind or another because they just think dualism fails, 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 is nobody can ever be a behaviorist about himself. I mean I can't think, oh well, when I pinch myself, the only thing that goes on is my verbal behavior and the behavior of my body. But I actually have a feeling. So behavior isn't – really is implausible and – but its failure led to, what a lot of people thinks, 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 input stimulus and then, unlike behaviorism, we then postulate, but it's something going on inside. And what goes on inside is a mechanism that produces outside behavior. That functionalism naturally leads to people to ask the question: what's the nation of the inner mechanism that produces the outward behavior? 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. The mind is just the program that happens to be running in the brain. The hardware doesn't matter. Now, that view, it's preposterous, 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 understand Chinese, but if you gave me questions in Chinese and I look up the program, what 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. Another one is to say, well, maybe the mind exists all right, 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 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.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
John, Here is what I find astonishing. 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, well, the problem with consciousness, the reason that it makes it such a difficult problem in philosophy is two features. One is we don't know how to assimilate it to our overall scientific world view. And that leads people to think, well it doesn't exist. It's an illusion. That's crazy. The second reason is we have this 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. 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.