

Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Tim, if you really want to understand what the human mind is about, and what consciousness is – and this had obsessed me for so long – free will becomes a really interesting probe, and here's why. It seems like we have two radically different things, intuitions that we're absolutely sure about. On the one hand, I think I can do anything I want, raise my hand, put my hand down, no matter what. And on the other hand, we know that there's a complete closure of events within the physical world, so that every event is caused by a previous event. Now, if you leave out souls or spirits, and you just have the physical world, and you just have our intuition, how do you reconcile free will?

Timothy O'Connor:

So, another aspect of how we think about persons, that, uh, make persons fundamentally distinctive – at least on our understanding – from the rest of the world around us, is this notion that we have – that we are capable of making choices. It seems to me that I'm, uh – when offered several dinner options, I can choose between them. It seems to me in much bigger and more important respects, I can choose to follow a form of life of one sort rather than another: I make career decisions, relationship decisions, uh, and we believe that it's up to ourselves to make them. We – we hold one another responsible for our choices. We say sometimes we make bad choices and we're criticized by our friends and peers. Other times we make good choices and, uh, sometimes even heroic choices. All of that – that practice of play, praise, and blame, is predicated on the assumption that it's up to human beings to decide how they act. They – they are subject to moral evaluation because of this autonomy they possess. That's one picture. Another picture is, human beings are physically embodied things, and in highly complex, complicated ways, physical processes unfold, with regularity through time, including processes coursing through our brains, and among those processes are, uh, processes that stimulate our motor cortex, such as the – the part of the brain responsible for motor movement, and it seems like there's an unbroken chain of – of causes and effects that we are just embedded in a much larger physical machine, that unfolds in this way. So, these two pictures that we have of ourselves, as morally responsible autonomous agents, and of physically embedded individuals, who are wholly composed of physical stuff, they seem fundamentally at odds with one another. So, if you embrace the scientific – the emerging scientific picture of the world, it looks like this is looking more and more shaky. This is how it seems to many scientists.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And therefore, they – some would say that this side is an illusion, that we think we have this control, but we really don't, be – because there are many things about our perceptions that are illusions, and free will is another illusion.

Timothy O'Connor:

Right. Uh, I don't think that that conclusion needs to be drawn. I, uh, I think we can take seriously our self-conception and take seriously, what we increasingly are learning about from science about the details of how neurophysiological, um, processes shape how we behave, um, but still supposed we do have capacities to make choices. I think, uh, a fundamental distinction one needs to draw to, to begin to see the possibility of reconciling these two visions, is between some things having causes and some things being wholly determined by, um, some set of causal factors. Uh, I think all of our choices, as well as all of our mental life, more generally, has physical causes. There – there are factors that influence why I'm thinking the thoughts I am, even there – there are physically embedded factors influencing me to take seriously certain options when I, uh, make a choice, versus other options that I don't even consider. This – all this information gets embedded physically, no doubt. Uh, but it might be that these physical factors, uh, influence me to some relative degree of likelihood to go this way or that way. In that sense they – they act as causes on what I decide, and yet they don't uniquely determine that I will go this way rather than that way.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But you're saying, me, me – what is this me? This me is just a common, uh, the – the aggregation of all the physical stuff. It sounds like you're saying the me is different from these physical causes.

Timothy O'Connor:

The me is wholly constituted by physical stuff, but I wouldn't want to say it's a mere aggregation, it's – it's simply, uh, all these little things, these little fundamental parts interacting in their characteristic ways. There's a unity to the me that's brought about by my conscious experience that confers a kind of unity on me, a subjectivity, a point. I occupy a point of view, unlike the table before us. There's – there's a way the world appears to me, and that is not – that – that, that appearance, uh, to me, that subjective take on the world, is not itself a physical event, even though it's wholly caused by physical events in my brain.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, even though you and this table are both composed a hundred percent of only physical things, there's nothing about Tim O'Connor that is not, uh, material. Correct?

Timothy O'Connor:

That's right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And yet, you are different than this table.

Timothy O'Connor:

Right. So, what we need to suppose, just as with – with consciousness, more generally, we – to make sense out of the – the subjective features of our experience, we have to suppose that the underlying physical stuff that constitutes us causes something that is, uh – it causes properties, experiences in us that are distinct from any physical properties. So, to make sense out of autonomy, we have to suppose that having brains that are structured in just the way ours are, that have been selected for by a long evolutionary history, uh, going through the primates all the way up to ourselves, uh, that these

brain structures can give rise to a certain kind of capacity to make a choice, a – a – to make a – a decision about how to act. Often – often what I'm acting, um, I'm not exercising any kind of direct control. I'm just going about, uh, my – my ordinary life. I'm biking into campus, I'm thinking about things, I'm on autopilot. But sometimes, a decision is called for, and – and options present themselves to me, and it – it doesn't seem that there is a physical process that is pushing me in one way rather than another. It comes to my conscious awareness, I have to decide. Now, that could be an illusion, right? But there's no necessity to suppose that it's an illusion just from the fact that, uh, any choice capacity that I have is at least a causal product of that very capacity, there being a properly functioning brain. I think people move too quickly from physically embodied to, it's nothing but underlying physical stuff happening here.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, you have the physical brain, constituting – creating some, um, agency that – that – that you have. Some –

Timothy O'Connor:

A sense of self –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And that is not – and if that is not an illusion, that has an independent reality to it. And so, that agent becomes able to – to make decisions and to have a causal effect, is that what you're saying?

Timothy O'Connor:

Right. Uh, now, it might – of course, there are other conscious agents, uh, besides human beings, if, uh, we believe that many forms of animal life are consciously aware because they have very similar nervous systems to us, in varying degrees. So, our best guess is, and they seem to experience or exhibit pain behavior and it's plausible that pain experience underlies some of that behavior. But we don't suppose that every conscious being makes autonomous choices, uh, that are worthy of moral evaluation. Um, so, it's – it is a further step to go from conscious agent to conscious agent having a capacity to make a choice that's not wholly determined by what's gone before. Uh, but it – it's – it's a quite open possibility. I – I think we – neuroscience has made unbelievable strides since the 1950s in its really early infancy, uh, to now, but there's a lot we don't know about how the brain unfolds, and particularly when it comes to human decision making, and it's quite consistent with what we do know, that there is a capacity to make choices under certain circumstances that's heavily shaped by and influenced by the underlying, um, structure, nervous system that gives rise to that capacity. But the capacity is something over and above the mere out workings of the – the fundamental physical events themselves.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And this aspect of persons or agents is not something that is, um – has any non-physical component to it. There's nothing non-physical there, but yet it is – is – it is a sufficiently different character than just the pure physical operations of – of the – the – the smallest constituent parts.

Timothy O'Connor:

That's right. So, you have a duality of features, and in this case, of capacities to act, uh, but there's just one underlying kind of stuff. It's a – it's a physical stuff –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And out of that, you get free will.

Timothy O'Connor:

And out of that, you get free will, if all – if all goes well.