Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Alva I remember in... as an undergraduate I took my first philosophy course and introduced the mind/body problem and I already had been interested in the brain, but it so excited me to see this problem having been thought about by the greatest thinkers in... in modern history in terms of how we understand what we are in terms of this mind/body problem. So I want to come to you and get your take on what is the mind/body problem, but the particular orientation is that over the last maybe century, certainly the last few decades for sure, there's more and more coalescing around this identity, between the mind and the brain, content identity that one is really the other.

Alva Noe:

There isn't a mind/body problem, there are many mind/body problems and I think something that... that is a little bit confusing when one starts to think about these questions is, is realizing that. In a way the big issue that's lurking in the vicinity here is... mind belongs to our nature, how do we understand it in a way that coheres with the rest of our understanding of nature? That is, can there be a science of the minds that is—that sort of fits with our world view. In a way, that's... that's the big question. But there are many other mind/body problems that are, if you like, a little more local or a little bit more subtle. For instance, the body, the body of an animal is not merely matter; it's the living body of an animal. It's, if you like, already... it's already part of the... of the space in which we find mind. So one of the questions that we can ask as the mind/body problem is, what is the relation between my capacities for cognition, for language and my particular embodiment in being built the way I am with the brain like the brain I have and with... with a body plan like the body plan I have. The body, the actual body is so important... we are habitual creatures, we have all sorts of bodily skills. When I walk into the room I don't need to think let's see, where's the light switch? I... my body knows where the light switch is. So my cognitive life is very much... bound up with... my possession of a body like this. In a way, my body is my tool and I am at home with my tools. But then there's other questions, there's the problem of mental causation, how is it that a thought can bring about a change in the physical environment? This is a... a serious problem since on the one hand we believe that every physical event has a physical cause. And we think that you can't have... you can't have an over-determination of causes, so what... what work does the mind do? The mind must be in some sense epiphenomenal. This is another... this is another route to the idea that...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Epiphenomenal, meaning... meaning that the brain is doing all this work and gives the illusion, well that consciousness is real, but it's kind of... it's kind of one-way causation that... that the mind is kind of a... a residual of what the brain does, but the mind has... even though it thinks it has causative impact on the brain, it really doesn't. It's just sitting there with sort of—

Alva Noe:

It's causally inert, that's right, that's the idea.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But it doesn't think so.

Alva Noe:

We don't think that way about our mental... about our mental lives... we think that we make decisions and as a result of decisions, certain things happen. So and then there's... but there's other... I just want to kind of... call attention to the many different other kinds of mind/body problems there are. One of the big questions that gets discussed in this area is... is... our knowledge of our own minds, we seem to have a certain kind of authoritative immediate first person acquaintance with the contents of our own consciousness. We seem to have a kind of acquaintance with the contents of our own consciousness that we can never have with... with the minds of others. So one of the big questions in this vicinity is... is how can I know what you're thinking, what you're feeling when... so it might seem... all I'm really given is what you say and what you do, which would seem to be at a remove from that going on inside you which causes you to say what you say and in virtue which you do what you do.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Right. The problem of other minds.

Alva Noe:

Exactly, the problem of other minds. So... so... the whole question then of mind/brain identity unfolds against the background of really trying to make sense of all these different, these different issues. There are...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So these different mind/body problems?

Alva Noe:

These different mind/body problems and... and there are others, I mean there are many different kinds of mental events. There are... there are wishes, there are desires, there are hopes, there are memories, there are... there are scenes, there are judgments, there are... there are linguistic competencies, our game playing abilities, our interpersonal skills, thanks to which we can live at all, you know.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Some would say these are all higher order things that are just emergent from the same kinds of brain activity at the more fundamental level, expresses itself in ways that seem to us different, but they're really the same.
Alva Noe:
Yeah one of the things that makes the whole business very tricky is that we come to the table as... as people before we're scientists, before we're philosophers. We come to the table with a kind of... with a general way of thinking about other people's thoughts, beliefs, desires, actions, why they do things, what—how to make sense of what's going on in the social world around us, and how to make sense of ourselves. And it's sort of an interesting question that... that has definitely been... been pushed by both scientists and philosophers, whether or not these kind of folk psychological tools that we're, we're raised with, have any use for science. Maybe science needs to leave talk of feelings, beliefs and thoughts aside and develop some new vocabulary for taxonomizing... the phenomena that we can hope to get a glimpse at in just the way that biologists need to go beyond... clichés about the heart and the mind in order to make progress in biology.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Let me tell you a secret that most neuroscientists think that philosophers who deal with this mind/body problem, which has obsessed me, are really, at best, irrelevant, and at worst... interfering with true science, and that true science has replaced—and rightly so—all of this folderol of philosophers dealing with the mind/body problem. If we want to understand the mind and the brain, we have to do science, n we should forget about philosophy.

Alva Noe:
I applaud science for tackling the nature of mind. After all, our mental powers and capacities—that we think, that we feel, that the world shows up for us—is part of our nature and science is in the business of studying nature. So that's great. This idea that there's an opposition between science and philosophy is something I completely reject. In fact, I think that the fact that the problem of consciousness, or the problem of the mind, is a scientific problem, makes it nonetheless philosophical for all that. In fact, I'd even go so far as to say that many of the scientists working in this area in fact simply are, without necessarily paying attention to the fact that this is what they're doing, taking stands on philosophical questions, and often doing so in a rather naïve way. We criticize the dualists for thinking that mind stuff, or spirit stuff, explains our mental lives. It's just a name for a mystery. But what is really impressive, is to appreciate that saying that it's the brain that explains this stuff is actually no less than talking about spirit, a placeholder for explanations that we don't have. The fact is that we don't really have much of a clue how neural activity makes us conscious.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
The difference, though, scientists would say, is there is no hope of doing any science of dualism, of trying to study the spirit stuff, but there is not only hope of understanding the brain—there's been enormous progress over the last few decades, we really understand a great deal more, we have many different correlations of different aspects of our consciousness and different modalities and we're making progress and we'll get there eventually—but that philosophers should keep out of our way.

Alva Noe:
Philosophy must certainly pay close attention to what's going on in the empirical sciences. But it's very important for the empirical sciences to realize that philosophy sometimes crops up within the scientific enterprise itself. That's what I mean when I say it's a pity that there's this opposition between philosophy and science. Sociologically, yeah, there's philosophy professors and there's physics professors or neuroscience professors, but if we're interested in nature, well, nature throws philosophical curve balls at us as well as empirical curve balls. And what we need in the science of consciousness more than anything else is a kind of conceptual reorientation that can enable us to ask the right empirical questions. And there's now good reason to think empirical, conceptual, philosophical, methodological—there's good empirical reason for thinking that we're not going to find that place in the brain where consciousness happens. Not because consciousness happens in an immaterial place or in a kind of unnatural way. But simply because consciousness isn't that kind of thing and it's frankly an outdated philosophical confusion made by many a practicing neuroscientist, even Nobel prize-winning scientists, I might add, that we should be looking for what Daniel Dennett has called the Cartesian Theater.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
But scientists would say that if you look at the history of the philosophers in dealing with the philosophy of mind, you see an endless stream of ideas flowing one after the other and absolutely no progress being made. The only progress that has occurred is with neuroscience in the last few decades.

Alva Noe:
It's, it saddens me to have to say that very little progress has been made in neuroscience on these questions. We have elaborate technologies that our institutions have invested lots of money on, and that many a grant has been devoted to acquiring. But these technologies, the new brain imaging labs and so on, are not actually adding up to an understanding of how it is that the actions of brain cells give rise to that characteristic experience which we call visual experience. The truth is, we're not a single step closer to answering that question than we were a hundred years ago. And this is not a controversial claim. Any scientist trying to understand human experience would acknowledge that. We have a much more refined sense about, a much more refined understanding of the neural structures that are necessary for consciousness. But at the very beginning we knew that if you chop someone's head off, you lose their consciousness. Or if you lop this part of the brain off, we lose their consciousness. But what we don't understand is if you like a brain's level, from a brain's level view up, how neural activity makes for consciousness. We're not closer. We haven't made progress in that area.