

Does Evolutionary Psychology Explain Mind?: Nicholas Humphrey

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Nick, evolutionary psychology makes great claims that it can explain our mind, our mentality, indeed, consciousness itself. So, I'd like to really try to understand how evolutionary psychology works. Evolution in general is sometimes used in ways that people challenge in terms of its, of its vast application. So, how can evolutionary psychology help us to explain what we conceive of as our minds?

Nicholas Humphrey:

Well, insofar as we can talk sensibly about human nature, and human nature meaning that we have certain characteristics, ways of thinking, the ways of interacting with other people and so on, then that human nature has been put in place by Darwin and natural selection. At least, that's the assumption of evolutionary psychology. It's not to say that everything about us has been designed, but probably the most important things have been. So, when we find people behaving in all the ways which are so familiar to us, and particularly in our social life, being jealous, being angry, cooperating with each other, punishing cheats, all those aspects which are an important parcel of the way we relate to other people, there's every reason to think that behind that lie, designed in modules in the brain, that those particular ways of behaving towards other people have been put in place by natural selection. I mean, I was in earlier on this, when I came up many years ago with what's been called the social intelligence hypothesis, the idea that our intelligence, everything we count as being you what makes us clever, was actually designed into our minds in order to enable us to deal more effectively with other people, not to deal with the material world, we didn't get the intelligence we have in order to make us better tool makers, or better navigators, or whatever it was, no, the reason we're as clever as we are, is because we have had to deal with other human beings, the most complex and also the most dangerous elements of our environment. Out of that has developed a whole lot of very specific ideas about how we understand other people. For example, by having a theory of mind which allows us to be mind readers, to read into the minds of other human beings, by attributing to them states of mind, like desires, and beliefs, and so on. Now we know that those are skills which develop in young children according to a program which seems to have been designed into their biology. Sometimes this goes wrong, in autistic children, for example, it seems not to be working properly. These programs are in us because we are biological creatures for whom those programs proved to be adaptive. They made us able to lead more effective lives in the end, to give rise to more offspring.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

One of these generated by evolution, gives us this sense of inner awareness, a consciousness, a soul, as you've put it, in a non, not in a nonphysical way, but in a very natural way, our perceptions of a soul. Others have talked about the awareness of death as one of the great changers of humanity. Others have talked about the awareness of death as one of the great changers of what human beings have become. How do you weigh these two? Which might have been the progenitor, the development of this naturalistic awareness of a soul, as you've put it, or an awareness of death? Do you think these two factors have worked together?

Nicholas Humphrey:

I think, I think they're part and parcel of the same story, just to the extent that we value our individual souls, we think of them as being so marvelous and special, and we count our luck for having been created as soulful beings. The very fact of having a soul puts us at risk, huge risk, which we wouldn't otherwise care so much about, which is that that soul is not going to survive our bodily death. The realization that we die and with it our consciousness dies, must have been a terrible blow to our ancestors. We don't know of course, when it first dawned on them. They must have been clever enough to think it--

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It was a blow to me, when it first dawned on me.

Nicholas Humphrey:

Sure, it's a blow to every, every child, I suppose. There's no reason, I think, to believe that animals fear death in that way. They don't have the imagination to think beyond their physical death and to think about the oblivion which would follow from that. If they imagine death at all, they probably imagine it, just like going to sleep. After all, we all experience a form of oblivion every day and we, thank goodness, come out of it again. I suppose that a chimpanzee, or an elephant, or a dolphin, if they even think about this, the things of what's happened to another of their group which has died, is that it's gone to sleep and it will wake, because that's what happens after you go to sleep. Humans are too clever for that. We've come to realize that actually, the sleep of death is going to be one in which we won't survive our experiences or the things we value most of all, sensations, tastes, smells, lights, sounds, and so on, are not going to go with us beyond the death of the body.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But if, if --

Nicholas Humphrey:

And I'm going to say, that that's what we've realized, but of course, at some level, we can't take that.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And we've compensated pretty well.

Nicholas Humphrey:

We've compensated in many ways, and one of the most important ways, it may have even have been a lifesaving ways [sic], some lifesaving ways that we've actually persuaded ourselves, that our souls can survive our bodily death. And I think the discovery of immortality may have been something which actually was crucial to the success of human beings. Because think about it, consciousness raised us up to an extraordinary level. It allowed us to lead new [unintelligible] forms of life, believe in ourselves, in our importance, in ways we couldn't have done otherwise. But the higher you rise, the harder you

fall. It also set us up to realize the terrible realization that this life, this individuality, other things being equal, is going to come to an end. What was the way out? Well, I think consciousness in itself had the seeds of the way out, because consciousness allowed us to believe in a soul which actually could outlast our bodies. And there were lots of reasons why consciousness, as we understood it, allowed us to do that. We already thought of consciousness, we still do think of consciousness as being immaterial, as being above the physics and chemistry of our brains, as being somehow out of this world. But that, of course, allows us to believe that consciousness isn't necessarily going to be tied to our physical body. We already were experiencing in dreams, the creative, imaginative play that we undertake every night with consciousness, in which apparently, we travel beyond our body and engage with worlds, you know, imaginary worlds, we even possibly are the real worlds which we've lived in, away from the slumbering body we've left behind. That allowed us to believe that consciousness can leave the physical body. And then I think crucial beyond this, we could believe that our consciousness could continually recreate itself, that it could last, and the best evidence we had of that was again, in sleep. But think of this extraordinary fact about sleep. When we sleep, our bodies go into the state of suspended, you know they're not, they're not active anymore, but they're not dead. They continue to live, they take over as mechanical devices. Our consciousness doesn't. Our consciousness vanishes once and for all as we go to sleep, and until we either wake up or enter a dream, we're dead to the world. Consciousness is, is, has literally ceased to exist. And yet, when it comes back, it comes back as the very same consciousness it was to begin with. We rediscover ourselves in the new day, we've, perhaps in the dream during the night. Now, what's that tell us about consciousness? It tells us that consciousness has a capacity to bootstrap itself, to recreate itself out of nothing, as it were. If you want a property for an immortal soul, that of course would be a wonderful property to have, that this immortal soul contains within itself the ability to continually recreate itself out of nothing. We seem to have the evidence of that in our lives, in our every, in the sleep-wake cycle, and I think it's probably been essential to us believing in the real possibility of immortality.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, at the end of the day, when evolutionary psychology has finished its project, how much of the mind as we know it today, will be understood? Will there in fact be any residual that evolutionary psychology could not explain?

Nicholas Humphrey:

Well, for sure there must be things which evolutionary psychology won't explain which, which are all the accidental features of human minds, I mean, thank goodness humans actually are, have all sorts of quirks and interesting [unintelligible] which just have risen serendipitously, or, or by chance. And that's what makes human intelligence, human creativity, human personality so fascinating and, and, and wonderful. It will not all be explained by evolutionary psychology, but some of the major themes of our minds certainly will be. The very basic factors of, let's say, personality, why we have some of the traits we have, and why we have them in different proportions in different people. We will begin to get even not just a theoretical take on that, but even evidence from genetics about what is determining these characteristics and the differences between different people. Now, of course in evolutionary psychology, is about genetic evolution [sic], and so in the end, the things which evolutionary psychologists are saying arose through natural selection, will have to be translatable into the language of genes. We're only just beginning to get there. But, to go back to your point about what can't be explained, well, thank goodness, there'll be an awful lot.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, integrating it all together, how confident are you that evolutionary psychology, as opposed to say, some nonphysical stuff, explains the mind?

Nicholas Humphrey:

It's one thing to ask, can evolutionary psychology explain the mind in all its aspects, and I suspect the answer is, no, there'll be things which it can't. But the things which it can't explain are not going to be explained by postulating some kind of supernatural force for example, or ESP, or, or some non-Darwinian kind of design process, which has built human beings. I don't think, for example, that there's any mileage in the idea of intelligent design having intervened in the design of human brains, to drive them in the direction mandated by God. Know everything which has been designed into us, has been designed because it led to greater survival in the cut and thrust of the struggle for existence.