

Do Persons have Souls?: Stephen E. Braude

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Steve, the mind/body problem, is there a soul, a spirit or are we just our brains, has been around for a long time, it's fascinated me. I used to be in brain science. I come to you to ask you about the mind/body problem today. What are the different beliefs about it, how does it work?

Stephen Braude:

There are a spectrum of positions about this, as you might imagine. There are some people who would want to say that the mind is simply identical with the brain, or more specifically that there is a relationship of identity between either types of mental states and types of brain states or particular mental states and particular brain states. Some would say instead, something just a little bit different, that even if there isn't an identity, there is an intimate causal relationship between either types of particular brain states and types or particular mental states. Then there are those who would take a kind of dualist position. Some would say if they are radical or Cartesian or substance dualists, that the mind and the body are distinct kinds of stuff or substance. The mind would be something – takes up no space, is active and essentially is thinking. The body is something that is essentially inert and takes up space.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It's the ghost and the machine. The mind is the ghost and the brain is the machine.

Stephen Braude:

There are those that take a more moderate kind of dualist position, often called property dualism, according to which there may just be stuff. It doesn't have to be characterized essentially one way or the other, it can be described, at least partially in physical terms, partially in mental and mentalistic terms. And these two vocabularies needn't be reducible unto the other without residue. That would count as a legitimate kind of dualism, but it doesn't involve positing distinct kinds of stuff.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So how do you look at the field? What do you think the evidence might be that people can use? Obviously in today's world, neuroscience and brain evidence seems to be skewing the, the opinions very much to the former categories, that mind is just an expression of the brain. In fact, people are even going further and saying that consciousness itself is an illusion and we have the modules of ways of thinking, our senses, and different things. And you put it together and the mind is an illusion and it doesn't really exist.

Stephen Braude:

Well, first of all, that's not new and secondly, it's not – I'm not sure that evidence is skewing it in that direction. But the fact is, we have a kind of sophisticated neuro-physiological vocabulary that makes it seem like we are getting closer to explaining it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

The more we learn about the brain, the more we can explain aspects of our mental life in terms of things that happen in the brain.

Stephen Braude:

Well, so some people claim. Others would say that we're still not getting any closer to the goal. I mean, Bert Dreyfus once said that climbing a tree will bring you closer to the moon, but it is not a way that will ever actually get you there. So that if there is something wrong with the very project itself, of trying to explain psychological kinds in terms of physical or physiological kinds, it doesn't matter how many promissory notes you eventually give. It doesn't matter whether you say – well, we're getting a little closer, we've explained this one tiny corner of the domain and some future brain science or some psychologist of the future or maybe God, at least, would know how to fill in all the blanks.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, well let's, let's hear your view.

Stephen Braude:

Well, to the extent that I even think that the standard way of addressing the so-called mind/body question is even a well-formed issue, I would say I fall somewhere in this middle category of being a kind of neutral monus (ph.).

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And monus meaning –

Stephen Braude:

That there is one kind of stuff. But I would say of that kind of stuff, that it's intrinsically undifferentiated, that it has no privileged kind of description. We can look at the world through any number of conceptual grids. The kind of grid we use will determine the sorts of objects that will fit through the various grids. One grid, let's say a physicalistic grid, will allow us to see certain aspects of nature. Another psychological grid will allow us to see other aspects and other regularities in nature. And there doesn't have to be any reason for thinking that these grids can be reduced one to the other.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Doesn't that mean though that the fundamental stuff, your monus, your one kind of stuff, is not the purely physical world of fundamental forces and particles that physicists talk about?

Stephen Braude:

Well, I would say that might be part of the picture, but no description of nature can be entirely complete. I mean, every time, look at it this way, from the philosophy of language. Every time we use a descriptive category, we are using concepts. Concepts involve abstracting out from the world as we understand it and limiting the way we look at things. So, every set of descriptive terms that we employ involves leaving something out. And no set of descriptive categories, it seems to me, can take in the entire picture. So, we've got to employ one kind of conceptual grid, one set of descriptive categories to understand one aspect of nature. And another set – and probably there is an indefinite number of descriptive categories we can use. And there is no reason, except a certain kind of scientific chauvinism, for thinking that the descriptive grid of the physicist or the physiologist has to be inherently privileged.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, fundamental physicists, chauvinists or not, they believe they are just describing reality, would say that all of your categories, however many infinite ones you want, are products of the human mind, which itself is an emergent or derivative property of the evolution of the human brain. So, you know, and the brain is ultimately founded on chemistry and then fundamental physics and very complicated, of course. But ultimately, you are dealing with the fundamental forces of physics and particles of physics and in some extraordinarily complicated way. And out of which, through an evolutionary process, mind and consciousness arise, which creates all of your infinite categories, which you want to make something new and something special. But it really is you know tertiary, way down the road in terms of explanatory processes and is not really relevant at all to the real world.

Stephen Braude:

Even if the mind were caused by purely physical antecedents, it doesn't follow that the mind is causally and totally dependent on those physical antecedents and explainable in terms of them. So, I am the result of a union between my mother and father, but in lots of ways, I'm quite independent of them and can't be explained in terms of any interaction that went on between them. So, some processes have an independent existence, no matter how they arose. And whatever the correct causal story is about the emergence of mind, whatever the correct picture may be, it nevertheless seems to be the case that the mind has its own appropriate set, and maybe several appropriate sets, of descriptive parameters within which we can understand its regularities, its nuances and so on which don't themselves reduce the physical terms.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

To get back to your monus, one kind of stuff that exists, if the mind is indeed, whatever the mind goes on to do, even if it's not, can't explain all of its causes. If it's derivative from a purely physical, then the monus stuff is a purely physical stuff, if even later on it creates something which can't be totally explained in terms of its explanatory power. If it's totally caused by this physical world of forces and particles, then that is the substance of your monus and nothing else.

Stephen Braude:

Look, whether it's deriv, derivable from the purely physical is an open question. And it's not even clear what that means. We don't know how to describe whatever primordial stuff there may have been. That is a conjecture that some people have. It's not as if that is an empirically established fact, it's simply a conjecture. We can debate all we want about what the mind may have emerged from. The fact is, we have it here and now and how are we going to understand it? That seems to me to be the challenge that matters.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, let's look at that carefully. I mean, if, if, if we are trying to understand the mind, that is fine. But if we are trying to say that the fundamental aspects of reality is, is, is based upon, is one thing that is sort of an amorphous. That if you look at it with one grid, you see the physical forces and particles. If you look at it with another grid, you see the categories of mind. That says something different about what is that fundamental stuff beneath everything. I'm trying to find out if that stuff is real, or it's just the purely physical stuff that's real and everything comes out of that physical stuff.

Stephen Braude:

I don't know how to answer that. I mean there's stuff.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I know how to ask it.

Stephen Braude:

Look, there is stuff, there is clearly stuff. And it has enumerable aspects. Our job, presumably, is to find some way of making the most systematic sense out of it. And our conceptual categories evolve with time and that is what intellectual progress is, I think.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay. I think I hear you saying that no matter how much brain science progresses, no matter how much we can explain every sense, every cognition, every emotion, every aspect of what we call human intelligence. That no matter how far we go, you are never going to be satisfied that we are really explaining the substance and the essence of what mental life is all about.

Stephen Braude:

Not in the way that you would like. It's not just that I'm an anti-physical, I'm an anti-mechanist. I don't think we can give lower level explanations, explanations by analysis, in terms of psychological regularities or psychological capacities.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Where does that take us, then?

Stephen Braude:

It takes us to new ways of understanding human behavior. Of explaining human behavior, not as if it's emitted by a kind of behavior mechanism, but to see and understand human action only as one of an indefinitely large number of possibilities in a much grander action space.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Is it only for human behavior that we are making progress, or can we understand something about the environment and the physical universe, or the universe as well?

Stephen Braude:

Well, certainly we can understand something about our form of life. It's only within our form of life that we can even make any sense out of our behavior. Because what counts as a reasonable action space within our form of life is constrained by that form of life. Look, there is a complication here having to do with what we even understand by a causal explanation. And causal explanations or the very idea of cause has to be understood as part of a network of concepts that includes understanding, explanation, intention attitude and so on.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And these are, and these are real things that need to be – what we need to be concerned with to understand reality?

Stephen Braude:

I think so. I mean, to me, causal explanations are like sorts of descriptive maps or sets of directions from getting to one place explanatorily to another. It's almost – if you ask the automobile club how do you get from one location to another? They might offer you a variety of routes. Each one of which has its virtues and its drawbacks, and its own way of illuminating the passage from one place to another. I would say giving causal explanations is a little bit like that. There is no one privileged from for a causal explanation and there is usual not one privileged answer to a question, what caused, say, my indigestion. Now we can explain it sociologically, in terms of what gave rise to the culture that allowed various kinds of spicy crops to be planted. We can explain it in terms of my neurotic Jewish upbringing. We can explain it in terms of my distress over a recent personal event, or something of that sort. No one of these has to give the whole story, and no one of them can give the whole story.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, at the end of the day, if I come to you and ask you how do I look at the mind/body problem, is the mind the product of brain, what do you tell me?

Stephen Braude:

No.