

## A Common Sense Defense of Idealism

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep273>

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your idealistic co-host, Robert J. Marks. I'm joined today by co-host, bagpipe playing Brian R. Krouse, who along with Angus Menuge and me recently published the book, Minding the Brain. And yes, Brian Krouse plays the bagpipes.

Brian Krouse:

It's true, it's true.

Robert J. Marks:

It has nothing to do with today's podcast, but it's an interesting fact. Brian, it's great to be your teammate.

Brian Krouse:

I'm glad to be joining you here, Bob.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, good. You're a lot smarter than me on today's topic, so I appreciate you co-hosting.

The book Minding the Brain contains a number of fascinating chapters addressing the question of whether our minds are more than our brains. Modern evidence and argument suggests that we are more than computers made out of meat. Our brains don't define us. One of the outstanding chapters in the book is by Doug Axe that deals with so-called Idealism. In a nutshell, Dr. Axe summarizes idealism as the belief that, "Reality exists exclusively of minds and their ideas."

We're fortunate to have Dr. Axe as our guest today on Mind Matters News. Here's a little bit of background about Doug that will impress you. He is the Rose Endowed Chair of Molecular Biology and Co-Director of the Steward Science Honors Program at Biola University. He is the Founding Director of Biologic Institute. He's the Founding Editor of Biocomplexity and the author of Undeniable: How Biology Confirms Our Intention That Life is Designed. And I have read the book, well, I didn't read it, I listened to it and I recommended it highly. And I'm sure it reads as good as it listens to. It's an excellent book. After completing his PhD at Caltech, Professor Axe held postdoc role in research scientist position at the University of Cambridge. Doug, welcome to Mind Matters News podcast.

Douglas Axe:

It's great to be here. I don't play the bagpipes and I haven't heard Brian. I'd love to hear that at some point.

Brian Krouse:

Yes, maybe.

Douglas Axe:

A little bit of harmonica, maybe.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Brian, I tell you what, since you are a lot more knowledgeable on this topic than I am, so I'm going to hand the steering wheel to you for a while.

Brian Krouse:

Okay.

Robert J. Marks:

So you go ahead and begin the inquisition of Dr. Axe.

Brian Krouse:

Okay. All right, let's do this. Okay. So, Doug, we are here today to talk to you about your chapter in our book *Minding the Brain*. The title of your chapter is, *Of Thinkers, Thoughts, and Things: A Common Sense Defense of Idealism*. And this chapter, it fits in the overall structure of the book, the second unit of our book, our book's an anthology, with overall 25 chapters. And yours is in the section where we talk about a number of different philosophical approaches to philosophy of mind, including a couple types of dualism, and then idealism. And this philosophy idealism might be one that's least familiar to people. So why don't we just start out with a overall big general description of what is idealism?

Douglas Axe:

Sure. And it has, as any philosophical idea, there are nuanced variants. But I'm just focusing on what I'm calling a commonsensical version of idealism. I'm not really principally, I didn't write my chapter to convince professional philosophers so much as to convince hopefully thoughtful people who are really interested in the matter.

Robert J. Marks:

And if I could interject, Doug, that's the reason your chapter reads so well. It's written to the educated reader, I think. Anyway, it's very well written.

Douglas Axe:

That's what I'm aiming for. So, hopefully. So, in a nutshell, idealism, well, let me go back to these three categories, thinkers, thoughts and things, and I throw that out there 'cos I think it's a good way to get your head around this. If you ask people what are the buckets into which absolutely everything that's real fits, a reasonable crack at answering that might be, well, there's these three buckets. There's thinkers, there's thoughts, and there's things, and they seem to be distinct because thoughts don't think, thinkers think thoughts, and things are the hard material things that are outside of us. So us human thinkers, we think of ourselves as being a thinker on the inside looking at the outside world. And the outside world consists of things and, of course, other people. And so there's a thinker that's a part of every human body that I see every living human body.

So those seem like a reasonable three bucket, comprehensive view of what's real. But there's problems, if you run with that three bucket view and there's different philosophical views about, well, if it's not those three, then what is it? And we'll probably talk a little bit about materialism or physicalism, which is the idea that really there's only one bucket, and that's things. And thinkers are just an example of things evolved things that have evolved, complex behavior, and maybe consciousness. And thinkers doing their thoughts are just really things doing computation or brain doing computation. That's one view.

Idealism is about as diametrically opposed to that as can be because idealism says really there's two buckets and it's thinkers and their thoughts. And that the things that we're thinking of as things, cars and buildings and planets and stars, those are actually thoughts, more specifically, those are divine thoughts. So the thoughts of God when he created, he's really thinking things into existence. So idealism is this idea. It's really opposite of materialism/physicalism in that instead of rejecting or subsuming thinkers and thoughts within things, it subsumes things within thoughts. So everything that exists by this view, and it's a view that I hold, I'm not just academically talking about this. Everything consists of thinkers and their thoughts, basically.

Brian Krouse:

Okay, that's helpful. And as I understand it, there are historically different philosophers with slightly different flavors of idealism, but the variety that you are most interested in, is one proposed by Berkeley, as I understand? Is that right?

Douglas Axe:

Well, Berkeley is the main person you think of. Bishop Berkeley. So he's writing in the early 1700s. He's probably the most famous proponent of this. More recent, Jonathan Edwards is another proponent of a version of idealism, but they're slightly different flavors. There's epistemological or phenomenological version of idealism, which is basically saying it's not so concerned about what is fundamentally real as it is about how do we know about anything being real. So that's what epistemology is. It's the philosophy of knowing how we go about knowing things. And I think you can very, very quickly show people that, although we all think that cars and well, most of us think that cars and trees and plants and stars are real, we only come to know that through conscious experience and we're not directly experiencing these physical things. What we're directly experiencing is the conscious experience itself.

And so if you want to be a skeptical epistemologist, you might say, let's start with what we know is true. And that's the thing that we most directly perceive. And those would be the objects of conscious perception, and then we can work out what the other things are or whether they're real or not. But we start with what we think is most basic and most securely known. And that would be the objects of conscious perception. My take on this is more, that becomes a very philosophical project to argue about what we know and how we know it, or it can be. A more commonsensical approach, I think, is to say, okay, "Let's not worry about whether we can prove things." Let's ask ourselves, "What is likely to be the most correct picture of reality." And we're not going to worry about whether we can produce formal proofs to show philosophers, "Yes, this is the correct view of reality."

We're more interested in satisfying our own curiosity about what kind of a world is this that we live in. And so we're going to be willing to accept things just because they make a whole lot of sense and their opposite doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So that's the commonsensical nature of this. And that's where I land. I think it's real. I think that the best picture of reality is the idealistic picture. And I'm not so much interested in convincing philosophers as I am in hopefully convincing people who just want to think about it, that this is a clear way to think about things and it's probably correct.

Brian Krouse:

That's really interesting. Now, I know people hearing this for the first time will be trying to compare it to other ideas that they've encountered. And they may have taken a philosophy one-on-one class where this idea of the most direct knowledge we have comes through our sense experience. And then sometimes there's introduced connected to that, this idea that, well, we could simply be brains in a vat

and being fooled about the exterior world. Is idealism trying to make a claim like that? That the exterior world is not necessarily real in some sense? Or we could be being deceived or is it different?

Douglas Axe:

No, and I think this is, if we go back to Berkeley, he got a lot of pushback from his contemporaries. 'Cos there is, when I first encountered idealism, there is a weirdness about it because it sounds like you're saying, "Hang on, you're telling me that rocks and mountains aren't real," and that's not at all what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, "If we get to the bottom of what is the nature of reality and what is the nature of the reality of a mountain, it turns out that I think the best way to understand it is a mountain is a mountain. It is what it is."

And the physics of all the material in the mountain is what it is precisely because God thought this beautiful, massive, complex, intricate structure into being. And every moment that I look at the mountain or climb on the mountain, it is what it is precisely because God is upholding that created thing and it's created in his thoughts and it becomes actual only because he's upholding these thoughts and feeding the implications of those thoughts into other thinkers like me.

So when I am trying to climb the mountain and I slip and fall and I injure my knee, the pain I feel, the effect it has on my knee, the blood coming out of my knee, those are all consistent with this intricate and extensive, massive mathematical structure that is the universe. And in certain places that impinges upon my conscious experience. I feel the pain on my knee, I see the blood, I have to do something about this now. Now those are all implications of math being worked out and God is the one who's working it out. So it's intrinsically, you can't in any coherent way, be an idealist and be an atheist. So atheist will hate this.

Robert J. Marks:

I think that's really clearing things up for me a little bit. Again, as the one that's coming from the outside on this, because the first time you hear about realism, you think of the matrix and ...

Douglas Axe:

Idealism.

Robert J. Marks:

... idealism. And you think of, you think of the matrix. And I was wondering, and I was going to ask you, but I think you've answered it. You have, in your mind, your thoughts and such. And in that thought world I exist. And in my thought world you exist. And I just wondered how that was coordinated. And I think you're saying that this is coordinated through God's creation. That's the thing that ties us together.

Douglas Axe:

Yes, exactly. So it's not totally unlike the Matrix, but in The Matrix, in the film, you have humans having come up with a technology where they have, I saw it a long time ago, you have whole humans. They didn't have brains in the vats, right? They had people and then they have all these electronic stuff that's hooked up to their brains.

Robert J. Marks:

That's right.

Douglas Axe:

But the people are in this weird state where their body's being preserved and the big computer becomes an artificial reality and all of their experiences being mediated through some big computer. The idealistic view would be that reality is not, first of all, it's not malevolent. It's not someone trying to do something that tricks us. It's that God's intention in creating was His glory. But the biggest most important part of that is creating beings in His image. And that's us. And the physical structure of the universe is really a way for us to live and move and have our being. It's the way that we experience things that we're meant to interact with each other, that we're meant to do the things that we do.

Brian Krouse:

And it occurs to me that another difference with the matrix view is in the matrix you have these humans that are sitting in little, big test tube devices that they're being mined for energy or something like this, I think, is the motivation, that's feeding the evil machines. But then the evil machines are feeding an illusory view through the human's brains. So they think they're living in an alternate world. So, if you are in that alternate world and you penetrate that veil somehow, you still have a physicalist view of the universe at that point is what's implicit. And idealism doesn't have that. You're saying, "No, the metaphysical stuff that the world is built out of, it's the thinkers and the thoughts. That's what it is."

Douglas Axe:

Right. When you push material things down to their very most fundamental level, you're left with the thoughts of God. So, the material world ceases to be its own ontological category. It's subsumed within the thought category.

Brian Krouse:

It might be interesting to try to come at this from the thinking through the problems with physicalism, which I know you go into in your chapter, but that helps contrast idealism as well. And maybe we could go through dualism as well. So we could start with physicalism. You could give us a little bit of a sense about the problems with our conception of there being in this external physical world, as a separate thing. Even in a Christian's view, there's this idea of a separate or theist view, there's this idea of a separate physical world existing. You could walk us through some of the problems with that.

Douglas Axe:

Sure. So, shall we start with just physicalism?

Brian Krouse:

Let's do that. Let's do that.

Douglas Axe:

So, to be clear what we're talking about, so a physicalist, it could be called materialism or physicalism. It's often closely associated with scientism because there's philosophical reasons why certain scientists like to think of the world as being this way. But the idea, the worldview is basically that there isn't anything other than the stuff of physics, would be a simple way to say it. So all the things that a physicist is seeking to describe with the equations of physics down to the shorting your equation down to subatomic and the very large, all of these things are, the physicist is aiming at a comprehensive

description of all that is real. There isn't anything outside of that description, and this is conceding that we don't have it yet. So a physicist would say, "We don't have the theory of everything."

But when physicists talk about a theory of everything as being the holy grail of physics, they really mean everything. That absolutely everything that's real would be subsumed within this physical account of reality. And where this breaks down is, there's several ways to show this, but one way to show it is to show that the physicalist view of what I'm doing or what you're doing when you think is not compatible with your own view of what you're doing, what you think. So in my book, *Undeniable*, I have this exercise, and I go through this with students in the courses that I teach as well, to imagine that you are in a futuristic brain imaging lab, and the scientist in this lab, they're all physicalist, they think that there's nothing to a human other than the physical body. So they think that your brain is what's doing your thinking, and they have ways to image absolutely everything that's happening in your brain down to the, we'll say, down to the atomic resolution in real time.

And you're conscious and they're querying you in this lab. And they can bring up on displays, we'll say, around the laboratory that you can see, they can bring up images of every neuron in your head, every synapse, every molecular event that happens in your brain as you're conversing with them. And one of the scientists asks you to count to 10 and to meditate on numbers as you're counting. And so you start counting one, two, and they stop you when you say two, and they show up on the displays, some images of, we'll say, your frontal lobe, and it's colored by activation. There's more blood flow. There's this temperature difference here in the frontal lobe. These neurons have been activated when you're saying two. And they say, "Is this what you mean? We captured this image, right, as you were saying two, T-W-O. Is this what you mean when you say two."

And, of course, you laugh and say, "No, I'm not denying that that was happening in my brain, but that's not what I mean when I say two." And they get a little bit flustered and they start drilling in further and further to individual synapses. This was firing when you said two. "Is this what you mean when you say two?" And, of course, there isn't anything that they can project up there. There isn't any structural thing in your brain, any material thing that they can image and put up on the display for which you would say, "Yes. That's what I mean when I say the word two, T-W-O, because what I mean is something conceptual. It's not material, it's not in my brain. I mean a number between one and three."

And in the book, when you say this to the scientists, they get all flustered and they insist that you must be mistaken because there isn't anything outside the material realm. That's the only realm that exists, and therefore you're deeply confused. And, so you've got two-way, it seems to me that if you're in that position, the good response would be, the best response would be, well, if I go in the direction of saying that, okay, maybe you're right, I'm deeply confused, then what does that imply about everything that I believe, if I'm deeply confused?

If I'm so deeply confused that I'm wrong about the meaning of every word that I'm using, then I'm comprehensively confused. And that means I should reject everything, right? Because all I have is this conscious experience, and you're telling me I'm deeply confused about the meaning of it. That means brains don't exist, the universe doesn't exist, you don't exist. I don't exist. Everything goes up in a plume of smoke at that point. And I call this a self-defeating argument. So the claim that a physical brain is doing our thinking is self-defeating in this sense, in the sense that it so radically contradicts your self understanding of what you're doing when you're thinking that you would either have to reject the materialist view or acknowledge that you're insane. And once you do that, everything is gone, including the premises that led to the materialist view itself.

Brian Krouse:

That makes sense. It would be quite confusing to think about how you would add two plus two if what you meant was those neural impulses.

Douglas Axe:

There is no conception. Now, I've argued this with lots of people, and usually the first path to try to rescue materialism is a representational thing where they say, "Well, I mean computers do math and computers are physical." And the answer to that is that representation only works if the thing being represented, the non-physical thing being represented is real. So we can't make math disappear by saying that, "Yes, I can take a pen and make a mark on paper that will be recognized as the numeral two, which represents the number two, and I can do math on paper that way." But the moment you say that, "Oh, the reality is limited to ink on the paper," now you've lost the conceptual realm and you're back to the problem of contradicting my own conscious experience and negating my sanity, and therefore everything evaporates.

So yes, it's true that we use physical things to represent non-physical things, and language is one of those. Right now I'm speaking and it's causing little pressure fluctuations in the air. Microphone is picking that up. All kinds of electronics are happening. That's all physical. But when you're hearing me, at some point after your brain has processed, the auditory center has done some processing, at some point that is being fed to an immaterial mind, a thinker, as we're calling it, which is you. And you have to be understanding, reconstructing what I'm saying in terms of concepts that are not physical. And if you try to force that whole thing to be physical, it all evaporates and becomes nonsense.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. That's really interesting. So, is this the same or maybe a slightly different take on this, where there's a tension between the way in which humans can reason from premises as part of arguments to valid conclusions and an attempted, a physicalist basis for those kinds of operations? Whereas if you're talking about just the physical behavior of our brains and the neurons in our brains, you're talking about what sorts of physical laws or biochemical laws are controlling that behavior. That seems quite different than having the conceptual reasoning guide you're thinking. Is that a similar tension or is that basically reduced to the same thing you're talking about?

Douglas Axe:

Well, yeah. So a physicalist will have to take this view that your thinking is a brain function and your brain is doing your thinking because a physicalist is not going to acknowledge the existence of a category outside of the physical, which I'm saying your worldview is incoherent if you don't acknowledge this, that our mind has to be immaterial and our thoughts have to be immaterial because if you force them to be material, the whole thing goes up in smoke and it starts with, okay, I'm crazy because the account that you're giving of me contradicts my own internal first person perspective of what I'm doing so radically that I would have to throw up my hands and say, "I don't know what I'm doing. I'm totally insane. None of this makes any sense." But then all the things that the materialist assumes, that the physicalist assumes, go up in smoke with it, so the whole thing goes up in smoke.

Brian Krouse:

Makes sense. Very interesting. Okay, so this is some of the problems with physicalism. How about dualism? How does that fit in?

Douglas Axe:

Okay. Most people when you talk about substance dualism are going back to René Descartes and is sometimes called the Cartesian Theater. So he views a human as being a physical body and then an immaterial mind, soul, spirit that's like, it's like sitting in this theater, the mind, soul spirit is sitting in this theater and on the stage is all the immediate sense perceptions that are presented to this thinker that have come through the body, come through the eyes, through the ears, through the sense of touch, all these things. And they're processed by the physical brain. And then at some point, something appears up there on the stage and it's presented to this immaterial mind, soul, spirit that is the conscious you inside of your body.

And I think that's a very much more correct way to view things than the physicalist way of viewing things. Because here in Cartesian dualism, you're saying, "No, your immaterial self is real, and those thoughts that you're thinking are not material and your consciousness can't be explained as a physical phenomenon." But where dualism runs into trouble, I think, is it's called substance dualism because as a philosopher, or as a philosophy, it's really saying there are two distinct ontological categories. So ontology is the study of being in its most fundamental sense. What are the things that are, what sort of kinds of things exist? And the substance dualist is saying, "Well, physical things exist and they have their own own category of existence." And then non-physical things like fingers and thoughts exist. So the problem is that a dualist will say, "Yes, there are these three buckets and they're all distinct and thinkers, and their thoughts are in this realm of the non-physical and things are in the realm of the physical."

But when you go that way, somehow we have to connect our mental conscious, non-physical experience with our physical body. And so something has to bridge a gap here, because I am standing in a desk here, I can feel the desk with my hands. I think the desk is physical, but how on earth would a physical signal from my sensory perception, the feel of the surface of my desk with my hand, how would that get to the immaterial self that's supposedly in this Cartesian theater, something has to mediate a bridge between atoms, basically, physical stuff and a being that's not at all physical, a mind, soul, spirit that's not at all composed of atoms. And atoms can't do that, right? Because how can atoms reach into this thing that's not physical? And conversely, if my mind, soul, spirit is not at all physical, how would it grab atoms in my brain?

So you have this bridge, you have this gulf, really, once you go the direction of two ontologically distinct categories, and you have the problem of how would you bridge this gulf? Now, one way to do that would be say, well, God bridges the Gulf. And in a sense, I think that's correct, but then you still have a problem with God because God is described as a spirit being God the Father we're talking about here. And really, God, the Trinitarian view of God is in eternity past is not a physical, there's not physical substance to God until the incarnation. And that's the point where God, the Son, takes on flesh and has a physical body. So we have to, if we go back to the Cartesian theater, you have to somehow explain how would an immaterial God bridge this gulf between the atoms, the hard stuff and the mindful spirit human being that's sitting there in the theater waiting for there to be an immaterial conscious experience presented to him or her, and it runs into the same problems.

If God is not at all physical, then how does God interact with the physical? It's not nearly as problematic this view as the physicalist view, but I think that these problems about how could there be a category of existence where God doesn't exist, and that would be the physical category, and how would he move in that realm if he doesn't exist in that realm? And those problems go away if you say, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe this hard stuff that Adams, that we're talking about, they aren't fundamentally distinct from God's thoughts. Maybe they are God's thoughts, and maybe physics looks so much like math because it is math, because God has come up with this mathematical structure." So the idealistic take on this, I think, solves some very deep and thorny problems that the boundary between the physical and the non-physical, even for the substance dualist.



Robert J. Marks:

Very, very interesting. This is great. I'm learning a lot. I have a bunch of questions I want to ask, but we've run out time for this podcast. I want to ask about, this is something to think about for next time. What about animals and idealism? Are they part of God's plan? And also the connection between idealism and quantum mechanics, I find that very intriguing. And this is addressed in your chapter also. So, thank you.

We've been talking to Dr. Doug Axe, of Biola University, about idealism. It's a chapter in the new book, Minding the Brain. And to find out more information about the book, visit [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). That's [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). And so until next time on Mind Matters News, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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