

Unpacking Idealism: Animals and Consciousness

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Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I am your non-materialistic host, Robert J. Marks, and I'm joined by my non-materialistic host, Brian Krouse, who along with by Angus Menuge and me recent published a book Minding the Brain. Our guest today is Dr. Douglas Axe. He's a professor at Biola University where he does incredible stuff, and we're going to continue our conversation about idealism.

The question I wanted to start out with, Doug, is the question about animals. We can see, for example, that we as creations of God have this idea of reality infused in our heads in some fashion. But what about animals? There's no heaven for dogs, I don't think, or at least it's not addressed anywhere that I know of in scripture. But what about that? How does the idealism fit in the world of animals?

Douglas Axe:

Yeah, it's a great question. So I think it boils down to we... Well, actually, I only know that I'm conscious. I don't know that you are for sure, Bob, but I assume that you are.

Robert J. Marks:

Take my word, I'm conscious.

Douglas Axe:

All right, now I know. Now that you've told me, now I know. So we all have this... This is epistemology. How do we know what we know? And we're all starting from the inside of us, right? So you have this experience, you're building a picture of reality. And very early on, like in your infancy, mom and dad are people, you're a person, and you just come to grow into the world knowing that other human beings who look like you have this same first person conscious experience, the same kind of thing that you're having.

And then we're talking about idealism as a worldview that kind of makes sense of this, that says that really the things that exist fit into two buckets. It's not the three buckets of thinkers, thoughts, and things. It's just thinkers and their thoughts that exist. And that things that we call things, the physical things of the universe, are really the thoughts of God being played out carefully, accurately in order for thinkers like us to live and move and have our being. But there's animals too.

Well, if we go back to my first point about you only know by firsthand experience your own conscious experience, so I can't even know by any firsthand experience another human's conscious experience. But I infer, and I think it's very justifiable inference, that because other people are acting as though they're having an experience like mine, I assume that they do have an experience, an internal first person experience. Well, you can apply that same logic, I think, to animals and infer that animals are having a conscious experience.

And I think here that philosophers of consciousness, probably because they recognize it's a very problematic area if you're a materialist to explain consciousness at all, and so some of these philosophers would say, "Well, it doesn't exist." Or some will say it's an epiphenomenon that comes out of neural activity in the brain, so it has no causal power, but they'll acknowledge that it exists. What I would want to say is not only does it have to exist, but it has to be of paramount importance.

So everything becomes incoherent as we talked about in the last episode. Everything becomes incoherent if we don't take seriously the non-mental realm that we are non... Sorry, the non-material realm, that our minds are not material and that our thoughts are not material. Now, when I look at a dog, and I have a dog and I love dogs, or really I would say animals all the way down to insects, they behave as though they are having an experience. So an insect behaves as though it's capable of feeling pain and moving away from harmful things.

And it reacts in a way that as a human you can relate to. And a dog certainly much more than an insect reacts to pain and pleasure in a way that humans relate to. We have a natural way of imposing or interpreting what you see in the behavior of an animal as conscious experience the same way that we do with humans.

So I would say that the safe position would be that anything, any entity out there that behaves as though it's conscious and plausibly could be conscious, I would say that it is conscious or I would treat it as though it is conscious, because you get into moral dilemmas here. How are we supposed to treat animals? And if animals are not conscious, then they're not capable of experiencing pain. And I think that my iPhone is not conscious and therefore it's not capable of experiencing pain.

So it would be a waste if I took a sledgehammer to my iPhone, but it wouldn't be morally wrong in the way it would be if I mistreated and caused pain for no good reason to an animal because the animal is, I think, capable of experiencing pain and therefore I should treat it differently. And I think there's scriptural basis for this as well. So I would say in short, a non-material, an immaterial self exists within animals all the way down to any animal that you see behaving in a way that it acts as though it's conscious. And I can't prove it, but that's the way I would interpret things. Is that helpful?

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, it is. Let me push back on that a little bit. I can program robots to run around the room. And when it gets low on energy, it gets hungry, if you will. It goes plugs itself in the wall. They've had this sort of thing for decades. And then you can also program them with little sensors to stay away from other robots that might hurt them. But I don't think the robots exhibiting this behavior really display consciousness at all. I think that what they're responding to is just an algorithmic, if you will, response.

Douglas Axe:

Yes, and that's why I meant to nuance that there. If we know the backstory of something, I would agree with you, a computer is not conscious. It is just a material thing. There isn't really a self in a computer or in a robot. So yes, you could program your computer to whenever you hit the P key on your keyboard, it says, "Ouch. Don't do that ever again. It causes me extreme pain when you hit the P key," but there's nothing behind that other than my idea of doing it and then implementing it in the material realm.

So I would agree with you totally. There isn't consciousness attached to these things that we make because how would we make something that's conscious? But we didn't make crickets and spiders. As a theist, I say God made crickets and spiders. So there the behavior that seems to... It's consonant with human experience when something that God did make has behavior that resembles conscious reaction to things.

A safe bet is, yeah, it probably is. It probably is conscious. It probably is experiencing things. So it's behaving as though it's experiencing things because it is, whereas the backstory on the robot, we know it's not. We're just faking it.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. So it's certainly evidence but not proof, I guess, would be the bottom line.

Douglas Axe:

Yes. Right.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, excellent.

Brian Krouse:

That sounds like an application of the common sense reasoning that you're advocating for that you use in the chapter.

Robert J. Marks:

Let me ask you, this is a total turnabout, and that is, is there any relationship between idealism, the fact that the reality comes from our thoughts and those thoughts come from God, if you will, between that and say the Eastern religions which says that you're going to become one with the universe? Aren't we in some sense becoming one with God in some sense? I'm not familiar with the Eastern religions, but it seems to me that they believe in something like that, but there's probably a difference. Any comments or thoughts on that?

Douglas Axe:

Yeah, and I'm not an expert on that either, but the idealistic position, as I'm articulating it, no less sees each human being as a distinct individual than the dualistic position. So God is a thinker and I am a thinker, but I am a distinct thinker from God. I'm not a part of God. So the things that I'm thinking are my own thoughts. I'm not a part of God. I'm not an extension of God. I'm something that God created. In that respect, the dualist position wouldn't be any different from the idealist position. Is that helpful?

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that is. Okay, great. Appreciate it. Brian, you had some thoughts about some of the points raised in Doug's chapter?

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, yeah, no, there's a section in the chapter that I'd love to hear you talk about where you get into some more complex physics. At least from a high level perspective, you start talking about these subjects like quantum mechanics and implications for this topic.

And that to me is fascinating because on the one hand, idealism seems to be backing away from all the thought that goes into the thinking about the physical world. But in fact, part of the motivation in your chapter for turning to idealism comes directly out of the deepest and most modern conceptions of physics itself. So could you get into that?

Douglas Axe:

Yeah. So if you go back to classical Newtonian physics, I think that was the era where there's this sort of sense of what the physical world is that we grow up into without doing any academic study of physics, and that is the world of the hard objects. So I talk about these hard spheres. It's the world of the material stuff that we can detect with our senses. It's objective because you and I can describe things,

and I can describe something that you've never seen. And then when you see it, you go, "Oh, that's exactly what this person described."

So it's objective, it's really out there, it's real, so idealism is firmly a realistic worldview. But when you start to study this more and more deeply, so we go past Newtonian classical physics, Newton was describing the movement of the celestial spheres, gravity, forces and energy, kinetic energy, how these things relate, billiard balls, how they behave when you're playing pool, and all of this resonates really well with our own commonsensical view of how physical things behave.

It all gets much more weird though in the post-Newtonian Era, and it got really weird in the early 20th century with quantum mechanics looking at things that are smaller and smaller and smaller, and you find out that it's not at all like billiard balls. You still see, remember from the 1950s, 1960s diagrams of the atom and it was always a circle or a set of circles in the middle, the nucleus, and then these little spirograph-like lines with a little dot there that's showing electrons orbiting a nucleus the way earth orbits the sun.

It turns out when you look at things on that small scale, the atomic scale, the subatomic scale, it ceases to be billiard balls. It doesn't operate the way classical mechanics does. And the more we learned about this, the more strange the picture has become. And one of the most strange things is this little electron. A strange thing that was discovered early on, this little electron that we'd like to think of as being a billiard ball that's really small and has unit negative charge to it, it just refuses to behave like a billiard ball or a BB.

It's not a little thing. It's not a little particle in its behavior. And one elegant experiment that showed this is called the famous two slit experiment, where you can fire these little BBs, electrons, at a screen and the screen catches them, prevents them from going... Or we'll call it like a baffle. And then there's a screen behind that can flash when an electron hits it. And if you put a wall, a baffle in front of the screen where the electron would flash if it hits, then you don't get any flashing because the electrons all get absorbed by the barrier, the wall.

But if you put a slit in this barrier and fired these electrons one at a time, you'll get a cloud of flashes happening on your detection screen because they went through the slit in the barrier. And there's nothing weird about that. The same thing would happen if I were firing a BB gun at a target and someone put a barrier in front of the target, no BBs would make the target. If someone put a slit, then some of my BBs would make it through the slit and some wouldn't.

But it becomes much more weird when you open up a second slit, in the case of electrons, because now you get a strange pattern of flashes on the screen. And the only way to explain that pattern, you don't get what you would think you get from the BB gun experiment. You don't get just two blobby areas where the electrons hit the screen. You get a wave-like pattern with raising and diminishing intensity that fans out in a very strange way, that seems to have nothing to do with those two slits and BBs going through the two slits.

And it turns out that the mathematical description of that pattern is a wave pattern. It's as though my electrons that I'm shooting at this barrier are actually wave-like, not particle-like, and the waves are interfering because there's two slits. You can do an experiment with a water tank, people do this in physics, where you can show how the waves, the ripples, add and subtract, negate each other, and you get this ripple effect. Well, these electrons are behaving in a real experiment as though they're rippling like a wave, and yet they also behave like a BB.

Because when they hit the detection screen, you either get a little flash or you don't, and the flash is in one place. So it's like a BB, but it's not like a BB. It's like a wave. And where this becomes really weird is you might think, well, if I'm shooting the BBs through both slits, maybe they have some weird behavior

that's wavelike. But if I shoot one BB at a time, so there's only one, sorry, one electron at a time through this barrier, I will still get that wave behavior.

So one single electron is not acting like a BB in that it's still one at a time conforms to this wave-like behavior on the detection screen. And yet when it makes its flash, it is behaving like a BB because it's no longer the wave that's in this one particular point. And there's really no classical resolution of this. There are physicists, David Bohm and others, who tried to revive, recover some notion of classical understanding of what reality is at the atomic level or subatomic level, and it has never worked.

We're left with a picture of reality that's strange in multiple respects, not just that an electron is neither a particle nor a wave, but some sort of hybrid between them. But also that there's an indeterminacy now. Because with the BB, if you do your calculation carefully enough, and I know the velocity of this BB and I've got a slit, I can tell you where it's going to land, because we can do physics on the BB. But when you try to do physics on the electron, it ends up landing somewhere on that screen and there doesn't seem to be any way to say how it lands, where it lands.

All you can do is shoot it and detect where it landed and say, "Yeah, that's consistent with physics." But physics no longer seems to tell us how it resolves itself into a point thing, a BB like thing, when it was behaving like a wave. So all that to say, the tidy picture of physical reality that we had in the Newtonian Era has just dissolved away. And the more we learn in physics, the more strange it becomes.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that's incredible. I think Niels Bohr, who was a quantum mechanic pioneer, had big arguments with Einstein, for example. Einstein said, "God does not play dice with the universe." Bohr says, "Einstein, quit telling God what to do." That was his response. He also said something like, "Anybody who understands quantum mechanics and is not astonished by quantum mechanics doesn't understand quantum mechanics." It just has no relationship.

Douglas Axe:

Because it's mind-bending. It's so strange and so unlike what we think of physical reality being.

Robert J. Marks:

My pastor came to me one time, and we were sitting at this meal, and he said, "I don't understand quantum mechanics." He was looking at a book, I forget what it was, but it was a book that talked about quantum mechanics and such things. And he says, "Explain it to me." And my explanation was, it's like the movie *The Mystery Men*. Have you ever seen the movie *The Mystery Men*, either one of you?

Douglas Axe:

No.

Brian Krouse:

I have.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. It's a story about these superheroes with substandard superpowers. William F. Macy, for example, plays the Shoveler, and what he's really good at is hitting people with shovels. That was superpower. So the most interesting one was Invisible Boy. Invisible Boy came along and they said, "What's your superpower?" He says, "Well, I'm invisible, unless somebody looks at me."

He's not invisible anymore. So in a way, this reminds me of quantum mechanics. You have all of this uncertainty, like you were talking about, and then you look at it and all of a sudden there's a reality there. It collapses to some sort of solution. It seems to me that this ties in very, very well with the idea of idealism, that it takes the mind to interface with matter, just like Invisible Boy. And it's invisible until you look at it, and then boom, there it is.

Douglas Axe:

It also to me, speaking as a theist and a Christian, what if God in creating intended for there to be this beautiful, intricate mathematical structure that gives appropriate constraints to the experience of the created beings he's going to make like us, in particular, in which we live and move and have our being. But that to prevent people from ultimately worshiping the created universe instead of him, he makes the math so that the deeper you get into this, the more you see it saying, "I'm not the base reality."

So that's the one thing you get from physics. If you keep studying physics, you reach a point where it says, "Don't look here. Don't keep looking here if you're looking for the base reality, because it's not to be found. It dissolves away." And I find that to be a really interesting, plausible account of why God would make the physical structure the way it is, because he could have made something very Newtonian that is exact. But instead, he seems to have been pleased to make something that's much more mathematically elegant than Newtonian physics.

But at the same time, it vanishes when you ask it the deepest question, like what is this fundamentally? It goes away. It says, "It's not me. It's not the physical structure. It's not the math fundamentally." And that's because God is what is the base reality, not this physical structure.

Robert J. Marks:

Boy, wow. Quantum mechanics is mind-blowing, isn't it? I know enough to be dangerous about it, but wow, just what I know is just astonishing. Look, we've gone 21 minutes and I'm going to call a timeout because we got a lot more to cover. We want to cover your conundrums in your book, for example, and we'll do that next time.

So we've been talking with Dr. Doug Axe at 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. That's mindingthebrain.org. And so until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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