

A Case for the Relational Person: More From Dr. Eric Jones

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep296>

Robert Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News, we continue our conversation with Dr. Eric Jones. He's a professor of psychology at Regent University, and is the author of the chapter A Case for the Relational Person, it's a chapter in the book Minding the Brain, and my cohost, along with Angus Menuge and me, is a co-editor of the book, that's Brian Krouse. So Eric, I want to start out with an off-topic question, my last name is Marks, Robert Marks, and of course I'm made fun of sometimes because there's Karl Marx, and for those old enough to remember there's Groucho Marx, so I have a very common name. So I'm wondering do you ever suffer the slings and arrows of being called Dr. Jones?

Eric Jones:

Yes, not as much as I used to, but years ago I had a student and every time he saw me he would say, "Dr. Jones. You call him Dr. Jones." So yeah.

Robert Marks:

Okay.

Eric Jones:

He was in a lot of my classes, so it was frequent.

Robert Marks:

Okay.

Brian Krouse:

... be there.

Eric Jones:

Never got old. You know who you are if you're listening.

Robert Marks:

Okay. Well, go ahead, Brian, you had some questions you wanted to ...

Brian Krouse:

Oh, I had a quick question for you before we start.

Robert Marks:

Sure.

Brian Krouse:

Do you ever get confused with Richard Marx?

Robert Marks:

Richard Marx. Oh, who is Richard Marx?

Brian Krouse:

He's a pop star, yeah.

Robert Marks:

Oh, he is. Okay, well-

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, you have to look him up.

Robert Marks:

I will. Okay, I'm making a note here, "Richard Marx." I tell you, I used to go into restaurants and I used to register, I didn't like giving them my real name, so I gave them my name backwards. I said, "My name is Mark Roberts." So I would wait to be called Mark Roberts. Then I looked up on Wikipedia and I found out that Mark Roberts was the world's most famous streaker. Yeah. So look him up. So I stopped using Mark Roberts. Just to let you know. Okay, Brian.

Brian Krouse:

All right, on that note, we were starting to get into some of the philosophical underpinnings, or at least your thoughts on this, under these different models of a person. Again, we've been talking about the atomistic model, which you mentioned is tied to materialism and maybe a purer materialist form of evolutionary biology. Then Darwinism, and then you have on the other hand the relational person. Maybe we could try to connect that to, these different models of the person that is, to some of the ... In the early unit of our book *Minding the Brain*, we delve into different philosophies of mind that have been dominant really over centuries, and we consider the problems that materialist accounts of mind have run into, and that seems like that could connect into the egoistic model, and then we also consider some other positive non-materialist models like dualism where you have a mind, a material body and an immaterial mind somehow working together in the whole of the person.

Then another that's maybe a little less well known, but we had an interesting episode with Doug Axe on that not too long ago, a flavor of idealism, which basically posits that mind, the mind of God and the mind of people is the basic underlying metaphysical reality. So do you see connections between these different models of the mind and the person, and your models of the person in social psychology?

Eric Jones:

Yes, to some degree. Now, I'm not a philosopher and I have not spent decades thinking through, and there's, gosh, I don't even know how many models there are, but I know there are numerous within each of the camps you just mentioned, so I'm certainly not expert there, but what I can do is try to match up what I do know, like the research and the theory and psychology, with what I understand from those models. I guess the first, an overarching idea, before we get into specific models, would be that if you look at the research and theory and psychology, and you looked at lived experience of people, and you try to stick with a clearly materialistic framework to explain social thought, behavior, the mind, whatever, then the explanations are insufficient. They can't resource the person that we see in the data and in our lived experience.

On the other hand, if you try to come up with a good comprehensive explanation of social phenomenon and even the things in the mind that the mind does for this relational person, then you have to leave these materialistic foundations. You can't hold onto materialism and naturalism and usually what follows, atomism and egoism. So you're stuck like, do we explain it well and let go of the pre-commitments we love so much? Or do we stick with our pre-commitments that we love and just do an inadequate job of understanding what's really going on?

So I would say that's where I see psychology at, and so if you're now going to match it up with a view of the mind, well, which one are we doing? Are we holding to those pre-commitments we see so frequently in the field? Or are we going to go this relational route that I'm proposing?

Brian Krouse:

So maybe, try to put it this way, you're not so much making a direct argument for defense of one or the others of these fundamental philosophical views, but you're saying, "Look, if we take the social psychology data on its face and we use the model that explains it best, most naturally, most richly, that's going to sit more easily with one or another of these underlying models." In some sense that's an argument for the strength of those models, but maybe it's not a proof or anything, it's just that they've got an affinity with one of these models more than another. The materialist model is clearly connected to the atomistic view, and the relational model is probably one of these non-materialist views?

Eric Jones:

Yes. I think that's ... I feel like that's a pretty easy statement to make is that what we can see in the research and theory doesn't align with the materialistic views.

Brian Krouse:

Okay.

Eric Jones:

It just doesn't, and we haven't even gotten ... We didn't even talk about, when we were talking about all the research, how much more complicated, how complex the relational person is compared to the individual. I sometimes relate it back to this view that back when Darwin was coming up with his ideas, he thought the cell was this blob of goo, and not sophisticated or complicated at all, and now we know it's so much more complex than anyone understood, or would have any idea, the couldn't even fathom, literally couldn't dream of how complicated it is.

To me, that's like the individual is to the relational person. The individual is closer to a blob of goo, it's more simplistic, although an individual is still complicated, but the relational person's so much more. Because we're part of this interconnected system, and it's like a single computer compared to a computer connected to internet, even though that doesn't really do it justice. So yeah, I think all the data and research says the materialistic account is not a good one, it doesn't seem to resource what we need, but which specific view after that? I think arguments could be made for a few of them.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, that makes sense. Well, I like this approach, it seems like you're putting the weight on trying to decide between these personhood views, it's a very empirical project, right? You're trying to not come at this having your background philosophical ideas, or maybe just a study from neuroscience or biology that's a prior commitment outside of the social psychology, you're not bringing that in as the heavy,

heavy weighting of how you're going to interpret things. But you're really treating the data more naturally and more honestly perhaps on the face of it. I like that, it seems like the right approach.

Eric Jones:

Well, I am trying to use the data for sure, but I wouldn't say that I'm not also using philosophical pre-commitments. So there's a course that I teach and it's called Philosophical Foundations, and we start with cosmology, and we walk through how do we explain the origin of everything we see around us? How did that happen? That was the Big Bang and all these kinds of things. We look at materialistic versus non-materialistic views, and it doesn't seem like there are very good answers on the materialistic, naturalistic side for things in cosmology and biology and these other areas.

If they can't explain those things, then why do we want to borrow those failed philosophies and bring them into psychology? That doesn't make a lot of sense to me. So we go another way, and so there's philosophical underpinnings there for sure, but that's basically telling me that this materialistic route is not going to be productive. What other way could we conceptualize it? We need an alternative, and so this is where the relational view comes in. If you look at the data in our fields, it seems to line up a lot better with the relational than material, but that's to be expected.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah.

Eric Jones:

That's the whole point of the investigation, in a sense. Yeah.

Brian Krouse:

It's giving you resources to interpret the data that you just wouldn't have, you'd be forced to have to reduce all these social forces and dynamics and structures to losery or secondary or some such, but you could treat them as more real and primary, which seems like it could just help make sense of what we are or how we fit into the social world in a much richer, more natural ... That's the awkward way.

Eric Jones:

Yeah. It's funny in a way, because if you look at a lot of the evolutionary psych stuff, most people, now again, lots of people in social psychology are all into this evolutionary psych models and frameworks and they think that is absolutely the way to go, but outside of them you're hard-pressed to find people who really see those views and resonate with them. It just doesn't make sense. So it seems to me like we've taken something that on the surface seems pretty obvious and we've distorted it into something that there's just no good reason to do that.

There is a quote in the paper that says something like, "We should start with, when we're doing science, we should start with things as they seem, unless we have reason to think otherwise." This seems like we've completely violated that in social psychology. Forget about the way things seem, let's come up with something that no one would ever think.

Robert Marks:

Yeah, that's Occam's razor, right?

Eric Jones:

In a sense, yeah. It's certainly related, yeah. So if we did that, if we took things as they seemed, then I think most people would come up with something close to what I'm proposing.

Brian Krouse:

That makes a ton of sense. So this is great, so big picture here, I think you've painted a really clear picture of these two different models of person, the atomistic, the egoistic one and the relational one, and you've talked about how different philosophical assumptions might lean in one direction or the other, but that the latter, the relational model is a much more natural fit for the data. All kinds of research to support that, so that's been very interesting.

Robert Marks:

You've outlined this relational person, as opposed to the materialistic person. There's been a lot of experiments in terms of doing the materialistic model of the person, I'm wondering, I guess my first question is are there experiments that could be preformed psychologically or psychological experiments, I don't know if you preform them psychologically or not, but could you do psychological experiments to explore the relational person, number one? Then number two, how widespread if your viewpoint? Is this accepted in the area of psychology? Or are you a maverick?

Eric Jones:

So let me ...

Robert Marks:

Dr. Jones.

Eric Jones:

Yeah. So no, this is not widely accepted. It's more accepted in philosophy and theology, this idea of a relational person and co-constitution and these kinds of things. You can find them in especially theological circles, you can find some of these ideas, and a number of people propose them and support them and all that kind of stuff. In psychology, I wish I could give you a long list of names and tell you about this rich deep history of the relational person, but it's just not there. So it's super simple, if you want to know more about it email me. I hate to say it, there aren't a lot of good resources for what I'm proposing.

Robert Marks:

Okay. Do you want to volunteer your email?

Eric Jones:

Sure. It's EJones@Regent.edu.

Robert Marks:

EJones@Regent.edu.

Eric Jones:

Yeah.

Robert Marks:

We'll put that in the podcast notes in case anybody wants to do that. Okay.

Eric Jones:

But your first question, can you do research for this? Sure, you could.

Robert Marks:

Yeah. How would you do that? Give me some experiments that you would do in order to puff up your theory about the relational person.

Eric Jones:

So this is pretty easy, because some of it's actually been done, but not for this reason. So when I mentioned earlier that self-esteem went through a change in the '90s and into the early 2000s, now, they didn't frame it this way, but they basically went away from this individualistic intrapersonal, like inside your mind, intrapersonal view of self-esteem, and therefore by default the person, and they moved toward a more interpersonal view of self-esteem, and therefore the person. When they made this shift all of a sudden everything just broke open for self-esteem. It's like, "Oh, look at the findings. We're finding what we've been looking for for decades."

Brian Krouse:

Can you say more about that, when they shifted definitions? Are you talking about how they were, what you were talking about before, where self-esteem was not a cause but an effect of the social dynamics? Or is this something different?

Eric Jones:

Yeah. So self-esteem was more conceptualized as an intrapersonal phenomenon, meaning it is about me, it's how I feel about myself and how I approach things. It has something to do with how this is moved up or down, whether I have high or low self-esteem. It's very much self-focused and it's very much inside the person. Then when they went outside of that and said, "Wait ...". And get Mark Leary for this, even though he puts it in an evolutionary psych context, I won't hold that against him because he's a really good guy. He took it out of that context and said, "No, I think it's interpersonal, and I think it's about relationships and social inclusion."

So when he did that all of a sudden things looked very, very different, and now all of a sudden we can make more sense of what the real causal factors are and what's really happening, and you realize that self-esteem is more of an outcome of something else altogether. It's not the thing itself, it's not a causal factor for all these amazing things we want people to do, but it is diagnostic for what's going on.

Brian Krouse:

Sounds like a massive paradigm shift.

Eric Jones:

Yes, and he himself, Mark Leary himself suggests, in a book chapter about self and relationships, says that "We should re-conceptualize all research on the self." Wait, that might going a little bit too far. He says, "We should question it because of this change in self-esteem." He does admit that all the self-research, which is mountains of research, is based on philosophical assumptions that are unexamined. I

think he suggests, if he doesn't say it, that we should seriously consider re-conceptualizing a lot of the self-literature.

Brian Krouse:

Is any of that happening? How long ago was that study?

Eric Jones:

Those studies were in the '90s, in fact I think we were, the people I was in grad school with were some of the first people to even hear about what he called the sociometer model of self-esteem. It wasn't even published yet, he was giving us a peek into the unpublished data at the time. I think that was '94, somewhere around there. So after that it has changed some, but so much of the field is so stuck in this implicit individualism, and it's just not questioned much, like most philosophical things. You know this from other areas in the academy is we're good technical experts, and we're usually very poor and unaware philosophical experts. Psychology is no different, we just don't examine those things to a large extent, and the people who do are few and far between and not listened to much.

Brian Krouse:

That's fascinating.

Robert Marks:

Yeah. I want to ask you about the acceptance of your thoughts and your model, because it turns out that there are certain things that the academy won't consider, even though they're solid science.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Robert Marks:

I'm thinking of things which even touch or imply intelligent design. You can't get it in there, it's against consensus. Consensus is stupid. My favorite story by the way about consensus is the consensus that ulcers were always caused by anxiety and being upset, and then some guys from Perth, Australia came up with an idea it was bacteria, and nobody believed them because it was totally against science at the time. It was totally against consensus. So one guy, to prove it, he infected himself with the bacteria and gave himself an ulcer, and then cured himself. It was so astonishing and against consensus so much that they won the Nobel Prize for it by showing that ulcers were caused by bacteria.

If you think of Einstein, he went against the idea that light was relative, the speed of light was relative, that it was an absolute, and a number of other things. So it's people that are against consensus that actually make the breakthroughs. So you're against consensus, I gather, and so the question is what does that do to possibilities of funding? Will governmental funding agencies fund your idea of the relational person? What about publication, are you censored at some of these journals? Would they be open to it or not?

Eric Jones:

So yeah, there are a lot of avenues there, but let me try to succinctly answer, and then you can follow up where you like. I would say that I am counter to the way we think in the field in three ways, or at three levels. One is just to propose something like the relational person and making no philosophical ties to

anything really would be counter to what most people think, but maybe could be accepted with a lot of evidence. So if I did a number of literature review articles, similar to the book chapter, but more robust and more wide-ranging, then maybe people would be okay with that.

But as soon as I tie it to design, I'm guessing here, speculating, but I would probably lose most people. Then if I tied design to a creator, then I've lost everyone. People in research psychology, that's not where they are, that's not where they want to be. There's like me and four other people who would be on board, and we just won't matter compared to the consensus that's in on all the materialistic evolutionary psych stuff. So it depends on how deep I want to go with it, if it's just the relational I could probably make a little headway, but if it's design, probably not too many people going to care, and if it's design plus creator then pretty much everybody is out at that point. So it depends on how deep I go with the philosophical underpinnings I think.

Robert Marks:

Yeah. So this goes back to the idea that a lot of the people in your field live in these little materialistic silos and anything outside of that silo is totally unacceptable, and unfortunately that silo constrains them in what they do and how they can think. That's very unfortunate. So the last thing, you brought it up, the three of us are all Christians, we're followers of Christ, and thus we believe in God. I think a lot of the stuff that you talked about actually points towards a creator, a God. Have you ever thought of an explanation beyond this that the materialist would embrace? Or is this totally beyond the ability of a materialist to embrace?

Eric Jones:

I equate what I'm proposing, because it came out of ... It really started with a more theological perspective, and then I tried to understand philosophically what that meant, and then tried to import all of it into psychology and make it fit. So this has been years of work trying to understand this myself, and to me it's almost like in biology and chemistry, the origin of life issue. When you're faced with what you think is an accurate picture, and materialism and naturalism can't account for it, then where do you go? Where do you turn?

Those options just don't seem ... It's not that they're unreasonable, they're just so farfetched at this point that they ... If I want to be sane, I can't entertain them sort of thing, right? I remember a quote that I use in one of the things, and one of these world-renowned philosophers is saying like, talking about things like the anthropic principle and that kind of stuff, and talking about fine-tuning everything, he says, "It's as if you had a one-millimeter bullseye on the other side of the universe and threw a dart from this side and hit it. That's the chance that we're talking about." If that's the chance, then why are we entertaining that?

It just seems silly to me, but that's me, and a lot of people don't buy that and they're not going to. But this is why these are philosophical choices, and that even though we have empirical evidence, the best we can do is align it with these different options and see which one it seems to be best supported. I think this view, this relational view is much better supported. It matters to real people, because this has implications for many areas in academia and real life, like business and management and leadership and education, and on and on and on. Psychology is a root of a lot of these other disciplines, and once we define things certain ways in psychology, it just bleeds out into these other areas and it's unquestioned because now it's three or four levels away, if that makes sense.

Brian Krouse:

You can see how pragmatic it gets with the self-esteem example for instance, so the order here is, "Okay, I've got a philosophical commitment to materialism that I need to stick to, and that constrains me to a random chance and natural selection argument. Then I'm stuck to the atomistic, egoistic person, and now my self-esteem has to be explained primarily in terms of individualistic atomistic ideas." That's your toolset. Then you try to make kids happy, which everyone probably shares that goal, unless you're just really a malevolent person, but you just lack the tools because your prior conceptual frameworks have forced them out.

Whereas if you have a different starting place, then suddenly you're treating the relationship as real and primary and you can actually ... Your focus is in the right place, it's not immediately on self-esteem, but it's in these other things. It can make all the difference whether you can help someone or not. There's a very practical outcome.

Eric Jones:

Absolutely. I would tell you there's a number, we don't have time to go into it, but there's a number of facets of this atomism, one of them is this idea of independence, and another is called freedom from obligation. In our culture those things are revered, we want people ... We think of independence as maturity, you want your kids to become independent. Well, that's nonsense considering this relational view of the person, the hand can't be independent. Why would you ever think that's a mark of independence? That's exactly what you don't want, that's isolation, that's not what we want.

Brian Krouse:

When you grow up you can cut your hand off.

Eric Jones:

Yes, yes. The idea of lack of obligations also sounds great, until you don't have any and then you also have lost your purpose and meaning. So these ideas are so ingrained in us, we don't really understand, but imagine two people getting married and all they want is lack of obligation and independence. How's that going to work out?

Robert Marks:

Exactly.

Eric Jones:

Yet, this is what's running around in the outside of our awareness in our minds are these kinds of ideas, and then we wonder why we have the divorce rate we have and all sorts of problems in churches and everything else. This is a part of it.

Brian Krouse:

The interesting part too is like an example of the self-esteem, they're like, "Hey, look, shifting our framework and suddenly we can explain things so much better."

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

So it's not that they're not trying to do the best psychology research and solve the problems, they just have this constraint that's on the thinking that's preventing them from seeing a path forward that's coming from outside the psychology data.

Eric Jones:

Yeah. Then it bounces back into popular culture to marriages and relationships and working groups and everything else, and we've got this stuff that's moving us in the wrong direction, and then we wonder why things are hard.

Robert Marks:

So not only in psychology, but in a number of other areas, I think that naturalism takes us to a certain point, but I think that as time has developed and we've dug deeper and have a deeper understanding we found out that naturalism doesn't cut it all the way. That there's things which are just, well, they turn out to be ridiculous, like you pointed out, Eric, in some of your fields. There's a great book by Frank Turek called I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist, and it goes into some of these arguments and how ridiculous they are and how materialism can lead you down a path of just being crazy and coming up with crazy results. So yeah, I think it does point to a creator, which is really interesting. Eric, if somebody wants to find out more about you, do you have a website that you could share with us?

Eric Jones:

I do not have a website, no.

Robert Marks:

Oh, you need a website, Eric.

Eric Jones:

I'll get a website and then I'll let you know.

Robert Marks:

Okay, that's great. Okay, yeah.

Eric Jones:

Brian, you could probably help me with that, right?

Brian Krouse:

I know a guy, yeah.

Eric Jones:

You know a guy?

Robert Marks:

You know a guy. Well, this has been a great time and I've really enjoyed our conversation. We've been talking to Dr. Eric Jones, he's a professor of psychology at Regent University, he's author of the chapter A Case for the Relational Person. It's a chapter in Minding the Brain. Minding the Brain is co-edited by

Angus Menuge, my cohost Brian Krouse, and me. It's just been a delightful time, thank you both for having this wonderful chat. So until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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