Dr. Eric Jones: The Case for a Relational View of Personhood

https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep362

Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. No man is an island, though written by poet John Donne in the 1600s, these words still ring true today. However, much of our modern analysis and study of ourselves is turned entirely within. We focus on our needs, wants, and abilities rather than how we interact with others. How much does this individualistic view limit our ability to understand ourselves and those around us? Today we have Eric Jones to present the alternative, a case for the relational person. Here's your host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your psychologically aware host, Robert J. Marks, and that's what we're going to talk about today is psychology. We're interviewing authors of the chapters in the book Minding the Brain by Angus Menuge, Brian Krouse, and yours truly. The book asks the question, is the mind more than the brain? The debate is old. In Descartes analysis of the problem, he referred to the mind as the soul, is the soul greater than the brain? This used to be primarily a philosophical and metaphysical discussion, but recently science has begun to weigh in and a lot of the science is addressed in the book Minding the Brain. Note that the mind-brain problem is a question related to artificial intelligence. We are computers made out of meat is the question which is being asked. If so, then artificial general intelligence might be possible, it might be possible to get artificial intelligence that duplicates the human. But if there are other things going on outside the brain, if the mind is greater than the brain, AGI, or artificial general intelligence, might not be possible.

To address this problem, the book, Minding the Brain, has brought together some incredibly well credentialed experts from a spectrum of specialties to address the question. I want to brag here and just mention some of the specialties that are present in the book. We have philosophers, we have neurosurgeons, we have mathematicians, we have biologists, computer scientists, cognitive scientists, physicists, neurology, computer engineers, and today we're going to be talking about psychology. For more information about the book, visit mindingthebrain.org, that's mindingthebrain.org. I'm joined today by co-host Brian Krouse, who is the co-editor of Minding the Brain. Brian is a software engineer with research interest in the philosophy of mind, computer science and neuroscience.

He has two master's degrees, one in computer science with a focus on AI, and that's from Arizona State University, and a master's in Applied Mathematics with a focus on computational neuroscience at the University of Washington. University of Washington, by the way, is my old haunt for a couple of decades. He was an early employee at GoDaddy, and that's the domain name, registration and host company, and spent most of his employee there in software development and management positions. And he culminated in his terminal position... I'm sorry, terminal. Is that okay, Brian? Terminal position?

Brian Krouse:

That works.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. It is terminal position as vice president of hosting develop. Hey, Brian, it's good to be back with you again on the podcast.

Brian Krouse:

It's good to be here. Thanks, Bob, for having me.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Today we look at the mind-brain problem through the lens of psychology. Our guest is Dr. Eric Jones. Eric is a professor of psychology at Regent University. He holds a BA in psychology, an MA in experimental psychology, and a PhD in experimental social psychology from Florida Atlantic University. His work concentrates on the connections among humans relational nature and human social thought and behavior within social and positive psychology. He is a former associate director of the Society for Christian Psychology. And here's something you don't hear very much about in the modern media about higher academia, in 2018 he was voted Regent University's teacher of the year. It'd be nice in news about academia that we earn more about teaching. I recently got to know Eric during a visit to Regent University, and I know this is going to be a really interesting conversation because we really got into it and actually overstayed our time drinking coffee for the next appointment, so it's going to be a fun time. Hey, Eric.

Eric Jones:

Hey. Nice to be here.

Robert J. Marks:

It's great. By the way, Eric, I mentioned this to him, has a great radio voice and I think you'll see that as we go on. Eric, the title of your chapter is A Case for the Relational Person. I think before we hand over the questioning to Brian Krouse, can you give us an overview, an abstract of the chapter before we start to dig deeper?

Eric Jones:

Sure. The chapter I wrote was trying to present a different view of the person than what we typically encounter in psychology. My background is in research, so I'm not a therapist, and I've spent my time reading lots and lots of research and theory. And when I'd read that research and theory, it dawned on me early on, even in grad school, that this isn't the view of the person that I think of in my lived experience.

So I've been thinking about this for a number of years and what I've come up with is this idea of a relational person that comes more out of philosophy and theology, but it applies very well into psychology. And so my chapter looks at the relational person and contrast that with a different view of the person, which is more typical in psychology. Then I look at a bunch of research in the field and show that there's a lot of research that's very consistent with this relational person view. Then I go into how this interacts with our brain and mind, and talk about how the mind is ultimately consumed with these more relational activities, and that big picture overview of what the chapter is.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, great. I guess one of the premises is that we're more than computers made out of meat, there's a lot going on outside. Brian, what do you think?

Brian Krouse:

I think this is really interesting how underlying the research in this area of social psychology you could have these two competing visions of what a person might be. So how exactly does that play out in the psychology research or among the researchers themselves? Are people firmly in one camp or another? Are these models front and center? Or how does that actually shape their work?

Eric Jones:

That's a great question. So in psychology we have big areas of research like developmental and social and cognitive and physiological, and the assumptions differ, our views of the person differ depending on what area you're in, but in social psych, where I am, we frequently see an evolutionary psychological view of the person, which tends to be very materialistic and naturalistic, frequently as seen a level above that as being very egoistic. And this doesn't seem to square with a lot of the data that we see in the field and even outside of social psych into positive psychology and developmental psychology. And I think the biggest thing here is these things are not made explicit in a lot of the research and theory. Sometimes it will be, but most of the time it's not. And so it's for the reader to infer what the researcher or theorist is basing all their work on. It's not apparent and you have to guess, but if you have a lot of experience you can pick up pretty easily, especially in social psych, where the evolutionary psychological frameworks are so dominant.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. And so it sounds to me like you were describing in your introduction there that it took you a little bit to notice that there was this idea of a person that was operating in the background and shaping the way research was understood, but that just didn't seem consonant with your maybe common sense experience or your intuition about how the data would make most sense. Is that fair to say?

Eric Jones:

Yeah. I think what made it difficult for me, especially in grad school, besides the lack of an internet to be able to hear other people's views on things, is that these are philosophical choices that are two or three levels down from where we do the research. And so these are things that are not explored frequently. And I use a quote from Daniel Dennett, who unfortunately just passed away a couple of days ago, where he says that researchers and scientists frequently have lots of assumptions but they're unexplored or unexplained. And that's certainly the case in social psychology, we don't really talk about the person. Although that seems odd, we don't. We just jump right in and start researching how people interact and think about each other and influence each other. And so these philosophical choices we make are not really exposed and therefore they're not questioned much.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. Okay. Well, can we dig into these two different views of the person in a little bit more detail? Maybe could you expand first on the dominant model? What did you call it, the atomistic?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, the atomistic individual.

Brian Krouse:

Okay.

Eric Jones:

The atomistic individual is someone who is seen as a self-contained entity. We tend to think of this kind of a person as being self-sufficient and trying to move toward independence, so you're on your own. And egoism tends to go with this view of a person. And in the United States this fits with us very well because culturally we're very individualistic anyway. And so this is a view that's pretty dominant broadly. It's not just social psychology or psychology, broadly in our culture this is the kind of individual that most of us understand ourselves and others to be.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. And where do you think this is coming from in psychology? Have people latched onto this because of the psychology data or is it something that's more coming from outside from a different philosophical commitment?

Eric Jones:

Well, I think some of this is relatively unexamined historically. We do know that in psychology our unit of analysis is the person, a single person. This is usually what we're investigating. Even when we do things in social psychology, like groups and group dynamics, we're talking about how individuals interact with other individuals, generally speaking. And so part of it is just a focus on the unit of analysis, but embedded in a larger culture here in the US of individualism that goes unquestioned. And so it seems to be a fit within the discipline itself, the way we conduct research and conceptualize things, but it's reinforced, I think, culturally also.

Brian Krouse:

Okay, that makes sense. And so we can get into the research connecting to these two models in a little bit, but just so we understand both of these two competing models, can you now describe a little bit more about this relational model of the person? What does that look like?

Eric Jones:

Yeah. A relational view of the person, this is going to be different than what most of us are used to thinking about. Not that most of us think much about what a person is, but if you were to think about what a person is, you're probably more comfortable with this individual or atomistic view of what a person is, but the relational view is counter to that and it's going to be more complex. It talks about a person as being part of an interdependent system and you're unable to extract a person out of that interdependent system very easily, or maybe not at all, and so we don't have the ideas of egoism or altruism and some of these terms that we typically use. Those really fit better in an atomistic view of people and they don't really apply to a relational person because of the interdependent nature of things. And we can talk about that a little bit more also.

Brian Krouse:

Okay. So I really liked your chapter by the way, it was just a very interesting chapter. And I remember an analogy that you drew in that really clarified some of these ideas for me. You brought in the idea describing a system and interdependent parts, you brought in the consideration of the human hand. Could you walk us through that analogy and how that helps you understand this idea of a relational person connected to the system?

Eric Jones:

Sure. Can I use a different analogy for the atomistic person first?

Brian Krouse:

Certainly. Yeah, that would be great.

Eric Jones:

Will you allow that, Brian? Is that okay?

Brian Krouse:

I permit it.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. I have final authority, I bless it.

Eric Jones:

Okay. Well, as long as you're in too then I think I'm good. So the atomistic view of a person I tend to think of as a Lego piece. And so we're all familiar with Legos. If you ever stepped on one, you know what they are. And so a Lego, you know what it is and you know it's designed to connect to other pieces to build things. And as much as you can take a bunch of individual pieces and put them together and build something, you can also take them right back apart and the pieces are just like they were. The putting them together, they didn't change anything. They're still Lego pieces.

Brian Krouse:

It doesn't change the essential nature of what that brick was. It's still the brick when it's connected or not.

Eric Jones:

Right. If you've got a blue square piece and you connect it with a red rectangular piece and you put other pieces around it and you separate them back apart after you've built something, you still have a blue square piece and a red rectangle piece. They're essentially the same. Their nature is not changed.

Brian Krouse:

So you can consider these a bunch of individuals connected together, but their identities are really very separable?

Eric Jones:

Yes. And you can take them right back apart, they're still the same. And so this is the way we think of ourselves most of the time. We think of ourselves as an individual piece, and while we might be part of groups, we might be, quote, connected to others. When we separate back out, I'm still me, I haven't fundamentally changed. So this is a good analogy I think for the atomistic view of the person. When you mentioned the hand, that's an analogy for the relational person. And the way that works is you think about your hand and everyone knows what a hand is, at least that's what we think, except if you were to cut your hand off and sever it from the rest of the body, is it still a hand? This is the question. And so visually, of course, it's still a hand. It still looks like a hand whether it's connected to the body or not.

But in terms of function, which is what we're mostly interested in, how things work and why they work, then you don't have a functioning hand once you sever it from a body. It needs all these other

subsystems of the body. It needs the circulatory system for nutrients, for oxygen to be transported, it needs muscles and tendons to move that are in the forearm and the rest of the arm, it needs the whole body to transport the hand to other places, it needs a nervous system to function, it needs a digestive system to even create the... You need all these subsystems the heart and the circulatory system, of course, all these things for the hand to function.

Brian Krouse:

So just for the hand to be a hand, it needs the whole body?

Eric Jones:

Functionally, yes. So visually you can sever a hand, it looks like a hand. Functionally, you can't sever a hand and have a hand is the distinction. And so if you think of it that way, and then you substitute a person in for the hand and other people in for the rest of the body, then you have this relational view that I'm trying to propose and convince people of, and that is you can look like a person by yourself, but you're not a person by yourself, you have the appearance of it, but functionally you're not a person by yourself. And we have nothing but mountains of data to support that. And so this idea of the individual is pervasive and it's dominant and it's incorrect.

Robert J. Marks:

Eric, let me ask you a question. I'm an engineer, so everything in the world I look at I look through the lens of engineering, but there is this experiment called Milgram's experiment, which I'm sure you're familiar with. And Milgram's experiment was the following. There was an experimenter, there was a learner, there was a teacher. The experimenter was a person who was in on the experiment. The teacher was guy that was ordered to give electric shock to a learner, who, if they answered incorrectly, would be administered a shock. However, the learner was also in on the experiment. And as the shock was increased by the teacher who was a volunteer, they would pretend that they would get shocked. And then as the time went on, as the learner got deeper and deeper and answered more incorrect questions, the shocks got more and more and more.

And the experiment in psychology was that they wanted to see how far the teacher would go in administering the shocks when the experimenter, the guy that gave the orders, was in on the experiment and was a figure of authority. And it was astonishing that a lot of people went on with this and went to the end and actually shocked the person to the point where the learner faked a heart attack and they just kept on. It was terrible. Now, that experiment, it seems to me, was measuring something which happens, which is common to a lot of people, but then there were people that didn't pass it.

In other words, there were teachers that came in and said, "No, I'm not going to do any more shocks. I'm not going to do that." But that was just measuring one thing. And in engineering we have something called hidden variables. And these hidden variables are other things which drive decisions, like whether the teacher is going to administer shocks or not. And I think that just looking at the surface is the one type of psychology, but you're talking about the different hidden variables, the different things which mitigate that response. Am I on track at all, or am I totally off track?

Eric Jones:

Well, first of all, kudos for bringing up great old school, traditional mainline social psychological research. Good for you.

Robert J. Marks:

See, that's the thing, most of them... Okay, that's old stuff. But most of the psychological experiments that I'm familiar with, and, again, I'm not a psychologist like you are, but most of them are trying to measure one outcome, and that one outcome seems to be kind of narrow. And so there's these mitigating aspects that the human personality that bring the behavior for being tested for one thing, it brings it to the surface. But that isn't the whole story. It's much deeper.

Eric Jones:

Well, I tell you, you couldn't have picked a better example. The Milgram studies are fascinating for lots of reasons. Their connection to World War II atrocities and those sorts of things, that's a whole interesting side. But what you're bringing up is this really basic question of how much do other people influence us and how far are we willing to go based on that social influence? And the whole idea behind the Milgram's studies was we didn't know what people were willing to do based on sheer obedience. And so Milgram decided to test it and find out what are the boundaries of obedience will we obey to the point of harm. And in those studies, before he ran them, he wasn't sure he could get people to shock others at all, much less to the point of real significant harm. In fact, he asked a bunch of clinical psychologists before he ran the study, and they all said that you're not going to get people to shock anyone at any significant levels.

So everyone was in agreement this wasn't going to work. And so, of course, he runs a study and had almost two thirds of the people shock at the highest levels possible. So this surprised him and other psychologists, and it makes you wonder what's going on. Well, it shows you how powerful the social influence is, and the power of social influence really reinforces this relational view of the person. Think about this. If we're all individual pieces and we're all separate and we're all our own entities, why would social influence be so strong? It's inconsistent with that idea.

But if we're relational people and we're highly interconnected and we're in these social systems and the interdependence and interconnections are super high and super dense, then, of course, we're going to be very influenced by those we're connected with, even if it's temporary, such as this case where you don't know the researcher, this is a new situation, but those connections are immediate. And so you have someone walking into this situation, you have, on the one hand, the person being shocked, but you also have the person telling you to keep going. And so there's a lot of social influence going on there. Can I tell you about a variation of the study that's really interesting for our discussion?

Robert J. Marks:

Yes, love to hear it.

Eric Jones:

So after the initial study, which is the only one most people know about, Milgram ran a number of variations of this study. One of them that he ran involved two teachers. And so you still had the confederate, the person in on the study, as the one who's the learner, but now you have two teachers and you have the researcher. And in this one, they just split up the duties between these two people. One of them would give the word pairs that the learner was supposed to answer to and the other one would administer the shocks. And, as the study goes on, what you find is if one of the teachers quits, says, "I'm not shocking anymore," then 90% of the other teachers will also stop. However, if the first teacher doesn't stop shocking and keeps going all the way to the end...

Robert J. Marks:

And the first teacher is a confederate, he's in on it, right?

Eric Jones:

They had different versions. They had somewhere it was just two actual people, just two regular participants, but they also had confederates. And so in the other one, if the person doesn't stop and they keep going all the way to the end, then 90% of the other teachers do also. So that's just a change of one person, and you get basically a 90-

Brian Krouse:

So people are taking really strong social cues, basically.

Eric Jones:

Yes, very strong. And again, if we're individuals, that doesn't really make a lot of sense. And this is why the Milgram studies are so interesting to people, is because we so underestimate these social connections, even ones that are new and maybe temporary. So you can imagine the power, the ones that are long term and ongoing.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:24:04]

Brian Krouse:

So I think I could see how these two different models could play out in understanding the research better with this example. So with an atomistic model, you're going to need to understand the behavior of the participants in the experiment, just in terms of their own individualistic motivations.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

But as you have these strong... I mean, I suppose you could try to reduce the social dynamics just to the individual motivations, but there's something more natural about just describing the motivations as part of the social system-

Eric Jones:

Right.

Brian Krouse:

... more primarily. And then, and that has greater explanatory power to understand why these people are doing what they're doing.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

And so maybe analogous to the hand and the body, you're talking about all the ways in which the hand is dependent biologically on the other parts of the system is kind of analogous to these social forces that these people are feeling in this experiment. Yeah, it's interesting.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, there is a lot there. But that does give you a little bit of grounding, as you say, to look at research and theory, and have some sort of expectation of what you're going to find. If you go with sort of the Lego model, that atomistic view of the person, then you would expect we would be much more self-oriented and self-determined, and the external cues would be less influential. But if we're relational, then those social connections are going to be much more formidable in terms of how we think and act.

Brian Krouse:

I remember a term you used in the chapter where you emphasized that some social psychology researchers will go so far as talk about this term relational self, but that you were really trying to emphasize an ontological relational view of the person-

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

... which seems like you're trying to push that more deeply. How does that work out? What are you trying to get at with the ontological term?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, oh, that's a great question and I'm glad you asked it, because occasionally you do see people talk about relational this or relational that in psychology and other areas, and what they really mean is social. And I'm all for social. I'm in social psychology, that's great. And I think anyone would understand that social connections and social behavior is important and yada, yada, yada.

What I'm suggesting is, "But why are we social?" And this is where I go to the relational ontology, meaning our core nature, what we're like. I would say the way we're created is relational. In other words, there was an intent and a design behind what we are and why we are. We're made for something and we're actually created then to achieve that particular goal. And I would guess that we're made for community, and therefore you have a person that's relational, right? We're highly interdependent, we're created for that. That's the way we're made, so that's our nature. And that nature then means that we see a lot of social thought and behavior being primary in our lives. So the social stuff is great, but we're trying to get a little deeper and say, "But why?"

Brian Krouse:

That makes sense, even though, and it doesn't really interfere with that idea, the fact that each of us as people have our own self will, free will, if you will. That doesn't force you, like acknowledging free will doesn't force you down the atomistic path, does it?

Eric Jones:

No. That's a great question, though. Yeah, so the way I talk about it is we still have free will, but we are somewhat constrained by our relational connections, right? There's certain things that theoretically maybe we can do or not do, but because of those we're connected to, some of those things really are almost impossible. For instance, if you're married, you might be free to hit your wife as hard as you can, but realistically, you can't do that. You're constrained from that, I would argue. I hope you are.

Robert J. Marks:

One would hope.

Brian Krouse:

Eric, I certainly am, so...

Robert J. Marks:

Yes, indeed.

Brian Krouse:

So we were just getting through describing these two competing models of the person, on the one hand, the atomistic, egoistic model, and then on the other hand, the relational model of the person and how those could be working in the background to either frame or help interpret psychology research, social psychology research. I'd like to, if we could, just pick out some interesting examples. Maybe a good place to start would be if you have some ideas that really highlight this atomistic, egoistic view. Like, what would be some good examples of researchers that are either doing research from that perspective or talking about the research from that perspective that really brings out how that model of the personhood is affecting the research?

Eric Jones:

Sure. Let me give you a theoretical perspective first, and then that will probably connect us to the research a little bit better, because most people aren't real familiar with a lot of social psychological research, but most of it is framed through evolutionary psychology. And those philosophical foundations, though they're implicit, it's obvious if you read enough of it that it's coming out of materialism and naturalism. And that's really the key here. It's not so much the atomistic and it's not so much the egoistic, it's what's grounding them. And to me, this is the big problem. So there are a couple of people that have taken Maslow's hierarchy of need, if you're familiar with that, lots of people are, and revised it.

And one of those people, his last name is Arson, and he has revised this hierarchy to fit with his evolutionary psych model. And what he tells you in this is just, it's priceless. It's so good, you've really got to look it up. What he tells you in this is that most of what you experience in day-to-day life is not what you think it is. So if you have a sense of meaning, or purpose, or transcendence, anything along those lines, if you have afterlife beliefs, accomplishments, reputation, status, all these kinds of things, does that sound familiar to you, any of those? Can we check any of those boxes? Are these typical lived experiences for people?

Brian Krouse:

Yeah. Certainly, yeah.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, okay. Well, I'm here to inform you via Arson that those are all delusions. Those are just delusions. And the idea is that it's some sort of anxiety buffer so that you don't think about your own impending death. Because what's important here is you get your genes in the next generation, and so sometimes we have to come up with all sorts of things to keep ourselves deluded, basically, so that we can live long enough to reproduce.

Brian Krouse:

So there's just nothing real about these imagined purposes and motivations?

Eric Jones:

Right.

Brian Krouse:

It's just a means to getting my genes to propagate more?

Eric Jones:

Right, right, survival of the genes. And there's another huge area that he talks about that involves all sorts of emotional gratifications and anything that's cognitively or intellectually stimulating. Right now, he's talking to himself and other academics, I would think to a large degree with that. And those are all distractions is what he tells us. So even his revised hierarchy then I think would fall into that category. And again, distracting yourself from ideas of death anxiety.

Brian Krouse:

So it sounds like he's seeing this... I mean, these are sort of common sense things humans run across, but he feels some need to reframe that based on the more basic commitments of the evolutionary biology framework or some such?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, so he's basically, from my perspective, I would say he's reducing the person down and almost reducing all of the person out of the person. And so all that's really left then is to squeeze out the genes and get them in the next generation, and that's it, because everything else that you're experiencing in life is probably either some sort of just a survival drive, like food and shelter, or it fits into what we just talked about, delusions or distractions. There's not a lot left.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

You know, a lot of the ridiculousness comes from the silo of materialism and naturalism. If you live in that silo and you believe that evolution is true without any guidance, that it just happened by chance, you're forced into some of these ridiculous sort of assumptions.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

I've always thought, I've met the near-death experiences recently, and I just wonder how the evolutionists would describe how we got an evolutionary development of near-death experiences. I have no idea. That's just totally ridiculous, and I think that that relates to what you were saying, Eric, but I think that if you live in this silo, everything has to fit in your silo, and you have to explain everything

from your presuppositions of materialism and naturalism. But if you allow yourself to get outside of the silo, I think you have a much more robust area in which to explore and explain things.

Eric Jones:

Yes, you're right on target. And what I think was helpful for me years ago to realize is that these are philosophical choices these people have made. Even though they might not recognize them as philosophical choices, that's what they are, and you can choose otherwise. And what Arson has done is exactly what you said, Bob, he's incredibly consistent philosophically, and yet I would argue he's completely wrong. So it's great that he's philosophically consistent. Honestly, I give him high praise for that, because so many people are not. They jump from one bandwagon to the next and you can't get a read on them, but he's sticking with what he started with. It's just, I would say it's completely inaccurate. It doesn't reflect lived experience or the research in the field, honestly.

Brian Krouse:

It's interesting too how he seems just from this description, it seems like he's getting there not based on really looking at the data of the field he's studying, the psychology or the social psychology data, but it's really coming from the outside. And if you are trying to pick a model of the person that fits more naturally with the data, you might just go a totally different direction, which is I think what you're suggesting with this relational model. It's got richer kind of framework or richer ontology maybe in order to explain the data more naturally.

Eric Jones:

Yes, exactly. I would say that these philosophical pre-commitments that people make, again, frequently, they're not very consistent with them, but he is, and certain other evolutionary psych people are. Unfortunately, when you're philosophically consistent with those commitments, you end up with some terrible outcomes and some things that are just not very compelling in terms of the research or when your average person reads them. I can tell you when students see these things, they just shake their heads. They're like, "Who comes up with this?" And I said, "Well-"

Brian Krouse:

It's ridiculous.

Eric Jones:

"... you kind of have to be an academic to think of something this crazy." I think we're all familiar with that, right?

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, we are. Well, okay, so I was just going to see if we could delve into the research that seems to you to be more supportive of the relational model. And if I remember right, in the chapter you had the research grouped into different categories. One was getting into research around the development of a person, so from developing from an infant to an adult and growing into a mature, healthy person. And then, you had another category that had to do with probably as a mature person, just the ongoing lived experience, like what makes people happy, have a sense of well-being, this sort of thing, satisfied. And then, there was another area that had to do with research around the structures and the dynamics of community, and social bonds, and things like that. And maybe these overlap and interact, but maybe we could go through some examples in each of those areas?

Eric Jones:

Absolutely, yes. Shall we start with the developmental part?

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, I like that. Let's do that.

Eric Jones:

Okay. So yeah, the idea here is if you think about the person as relational, then what you would expect is that a person can't even become a person, in other words, develop into a full person, without other persons, that we're so essentially dependent on others that we can't even become who we need to become without a lot of other people. Now, most of us are surrounded by other people our whole lives, so we don't really have a good, stark contrast to a person being raised by themselves. That sounds so odd, doesn't it?

Brian Krouse:

Is there like a Jodie Foster movie about that or something like that, you remember that was... Oh, no.

Eric Jones:

Probably.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah. Anyway, popped in my head from the past. Anyway, the user can check. Go, continue, go ahead.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, so the idea here is that all of our development is dependent largely and centrally on others. Now, you can look and read through all the developmental psychology you want, and we have almost a 700-page book that we torture our undergrad students with in developmental psych. And if you read that whole thing, even though they don't frame it this way in the textbook, I could tell you it could be very easily framed, reframed using this idea of the relational person.

And you could go through chapter by chapter and topic by topic, and talk about the essential nature of others for this particular aspect to development, whether it's different areas of development, like social, or cognitive, or even physical. Our physical development depends on others, to a large degree, or whether you're talking about different points on the lifespan, it's all telling the same message, and that is we are essentially dependent on others. And when we don't have good connections, our development of all sorts goes into a tailspin. And you can see this easily in people you know, and people you hear about and read about. It's not hard to understand once you start thinking from this perspective.

Brian Krouse:

Isn't attachment, that attachment theory or something like that, that's in this neighborhood, isn't it, where infants don't quite have reliable caregiver and it has long-term effects on their mental health?

Eric Jones:

Yes. Yeah, yeah. Attachment theory is one of the largest theories in psychology, has and sort of taken a life of its own over the last 40 years or so. And basically, what it says is you have an attachment when

you're an infant to your primary caregiver, and that attachment with your primary caregiver establishes somewhat of a framework for relationships that you expect moving forward. And this framework or attachment style, as they call it, is persistent unless there's some significant external factors that influence us in a different way. In other words, you could have an attachment style as that's established when you're six to nine months old, and it could still be with you when you're 30 or 40 years old. And so this framework or expectation for relationships is pretty persistent with us.

And just think about that, that one relationship then early on can color the way we do relationships for the rest of our life. It also has a lot to do with many, many other things. The research on attachment theory is wide-ranging. It has implications for cognitive styles, and how much we persist on task later in life, and just all sorts of things, our romantic relationships later in life, all kinds of things are connected to this. And so it seems odd, if we're individuals, that we would have such wide-ranging and long-lasting effects by one connection when we're nine months old.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, absolutely, that it's actually affecting whether you can develop into a normal, functioning person, that's got that long of an impact.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, that's really interesting.

Eric Jones:

Yes, we could spend multiple episodes talking about attachment theory, but we won't.

Brian Krouse:

Well, anything else in this developmental category that you want to use as an example?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, so while that one is wide-ranging and there's 100 different areas you can go with attachment, there's some more narrow examples I think that are really interesting. One's called the Michelangelo Effect. This was by a researcher named Caryl Rusbult back in the '90s or early 2000s, she came out with all this theory and research. And basically, what it says is in close relationships, we actually sculpt each other, just like Michelangelo took a large block of marble and chiseled out some amazing thing, a statue of a person, or an angel, or something like this, she argues that over time, in close relationships, this is what we do with each other.

And while most of us might recognize that once we start talking about it, most of us don't think about it. And you can tell this, because many people are not very intentional about the effect or the sculpting effects that they're having on their partner. And there's lots of interesting stuff here. And again, why would this be the case if we're individuals? But if we're relational, this makes perfect... It's exactly what you'd expect, is that we're having these significant effects on each other.

Brian Krouse:

And it's another example where if you were just to look at how a person's been shaped, whether he had attachment issues when he was young or maybe out of the product of some of these partners sculpting, you just wouldn't be able to understand that individual very well without reference to these social psychology forces, I suppose you could call it.

Eric Jones:

Right.

Brian Krouse:

You just wouldn't be able to account for the individual that's there...

Eric Jones:

That's right.

Brian Krouse:

... because he's so formed by these social forces.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, and to go along with that, there's other research by Art Aron, who again, in the '90s, started this idea of what's called inclusion of other in the self or self/other merging, which I think is fascinating stuff. But he basically represents this by overlapping circles, and they become progressively more overlapping the closer a relationship is. So he's basically giving us, in visual form, this idea of the relational person, that we are becoming one with another.

Brian Krouse:

So we actually, when we think of ourselves, we're actually partially including the other in our own concept of ourselves?

Eric Jones:

Yes, and the closer the relationship gets, the more overlap there is. And to the degree that we get to a point where it's hard for us to distinguish boundaries between my self-concept, and this other person, and all sorts of things. And to me, this is fascinating. The only nitpicky thing I have about it is why is it inclusion of other in the self and not the formation of a new thing or inclusion of the self into something larger? But that's not the way we think.

Brian Krouse:

Right, so you could actually talk about the system as an entity.

Eric Jones:

Right.

Brian Krouse:

It's, yeah, interesting.

Eric Jones:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

So we were together, Eric, and when we were having coffee together, I drew a little... I don't know, a diagram, if you will, a little circle in which I put you, and then a bunch of other circles that were connected to it, kind of like a spider. And that defined you, and you said, "No, no, no, that isn't the way to do it." And you drew a big circle. Do you remember this?

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

You drew a big circle, and then inside the circle, you didn't put the circles on the outside. You put the circles on the inside and you said, "No, this is you. Okay?" So I would have the big circle, which was me, and then I'd have another circle connected to it, says, "Your mother, and your father, and your best friend." And you said, "No, no, no. Make it a big circle. And inside that big circle, put a little circle, and that little circle would have your father, your mother, your best friend, et cetera." I thought that was very insightful, and I think that relates to what you're talking about.

Eric Jones:

Yes, absolutely, it does. And it's too bad we don't have a visual of that, because that is a great distinction between this idea of the individual, the atomistic person, and the relational person, because the atomistic person sees themselves as a separate entity, and while you can be connected to others, they're separate from you. Whereas, the relational person says, "These other people actually co-constitute me, they're a part of me." And this is why it's so painful when certain people leave or are gone, their absence. People say things like, "It's like a part of me is missing."

And well, it's not like, it is. It's a part of you missing, it's a part of you missing. This is what it is, that's why it feels that way. It's not like it, it is it. These people are part of us, they've co-constituted us, and it can be very difficult when we lose a part of ourselves. Of course, that makes perfect sense. It's not fun when you chop your hand off, either, I bet.

Robert J. Marks:

And yeah, in fact, I'll never know.

Eric Jones:

Let's hope, yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, I'll never know. My initial thought was some of these circles inside the big circle, which is you, some of these circles are bigger than the others, but you're talking about actually taking one of these circles that is inside you, that kind of defines you, and losing it.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

I have an acquaintance whose sister was murdered and it totally destroyed her. It was this little circle being taken out of her big circle, because she had such a close relationship.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

She turned to alcohol and that one lacking circle just destroyed her life. She became an alcoholic after that because she couldn't deal with the feelings of losing the little circle inside her, which helped define her.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, and if we're like Lego pieces, if we're these atomistic, self-contained entities, why would that have such a strong influence?

Is why would that have such a strong influence?

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:48:04]

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly, yes.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah.

Eric Jones:

Right? But if it's part of us, then it makes perfect ... It's exactly what we would expect.

Brian Krouse:

That's very interesting.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

Okay, so let's try out another category of the research. Overlapping, I'm sure. But so you've developed as a person, now you're living as a person, and you've got questions about like, "What leads to a meaningful, lots of well-being, satisfied life?" This is a subcategory of the research you address too.

Eric Jones:

Sure. Yeah. So, yeah, once you've had hundreds or thousands of people help you develop into a person, and hopefully that went pretty well, then we have lived experience. What is it like to live as a relational

person? Well, as you might imagine, it's highly dependent on your connections with others, and when you look at a lot of the research, you see this over and over and over and over and over again.

So one of the things I talk about in the chapter is this idea of the need to belong, and there's a ... This is one of the most highly cited papers in social psychology, maybe psychology as a whole, and it's where Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary go through an extensive literature review and talk about all the ways that belonging is an actual need, which is a pretty high bar. This is not just like it's important, it's an actual need for us, and if we don't get it met, bad things happen. And I won't go through the entire article because it's rather lengthy, but I will say just briefly that it's not hard to imagine belonging as a need after we have all just gone through COVID, because that wasn't a lack of belonging, that was just a somewhat reduced level of belonging. In other words, it didn't eliminate all our belongings.

It's not like all of us were in complete isolation for a year and a half, it was just reduced some, and collectively, we just fell apart, with even a reduction in it. It didn't go well.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, I noticed that when I'm feeling kind of melancholy, I notice that when I'm around people and have pleasant interactions, I become happy.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

It's this relational thing, which is really, really important. So that's what you're speaking of.

Eric Jones:

Yes. So that's sort of a big, broad answer, but even in a lot of the specific research like ... There's been a lot of research in the last 20 years on gratitude, and it's almost become a meme at this point that, "Oh, say three things you're grateful for every night before you go to bed and your life will be better." And I'm not knocking that or trying to mock it necessarily, but we've kind of missed the idea. The idea is that gratitude actually helps, builds the bonds of relationship.

That's the point. And so sitting by yourself, being grateful-

Brian Krouse:

I see. Rather than gratitude, serving yourself directly, it's actually strengthening you through.

Eric Jones:

Yeah. Yeah, if you sit by yourself and are grateful, that's better than being angry or grumbling, but the idea is the best. That's okay, but even better is actually being grateful to someone. What a concept. Maybe thank them.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah.

Eric Jones:

Yes. It's the social part.

Robert J. Marks:

I read a psychological experiment, where there was this long line of people, and a guy went and got ... This was the psychologist doing the testing. He bought two sodas, and he came up to a guy in line and said, "Look, I got these two sodas. I can't take them both. Would you like one?," and so the other person took it.

And then, he would ask them later, "Look, man, I lost my wallet. I need five bucks for cab. Can you help me with this?" And the people that accepted the soda as a gift were much more reactive to the request for $5 as opposed to when he went up to somebody that he'd never talked to before and asked for five bucks.

Eric Jones:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

So this is this idea of gratitude that you're talking about.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, gratitude and reciprocity. Yup, and again-

Robert J. Marks:

Reciprocity, okay.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, reciprocity is, again, why would you expect reciprocity and all sorts of versions of it, like the one you described and many others, if we're not relational? Why would we feel obligated in any way? If we're self-contained entities and we're trying to get our genes in the next generation and all this kind of stuff, then we take advantage of someone doing something for us and not give back? Wouldn't that be the smart move, to take and not give?

Brian Krouse:

That's interesting. So where does the talk of things like improving kids' self-esteem, or maybe adults more to speak of self-actualization, this kind of talk? Is that all just squarely within the egoistic model, or how does that work?

Eric Jones:

Well, it depends on how you define it. So self-esteem is an interesting area because in the '60s, '70s, '80s, even into the '90s, there were a lot of people pushing self-esteem programs in public schools, which are still going on. We're spending lots of money on that. But in the late '80s, early '90s, the best researchers realized, "We've sort of run the course," and self-esteem is not a causal factor for anything. It's diagnostic, but it's not causal.

Robert J. Marks:

Could you unpack that a little bit, because that's very interesting?

Eric Jones:

Sure. Yeah. So what we thought was if we can boost kids' self-esteems in school, that we would get better grades and fewer behavioral problems in the classroom, all the bad things would go down, all the good things would go up, and what they found after decades of research is we don't see evidence of any of that. It's correlational, but there's no causal evidence. And what they found was, "That's not really the thing we should be looking at."

But again, with our very self-oriented culture, individualistic culture, that was just, of course, the first thing in everybody's mind. What they found out was self-esteem is actually diagnostic for social inclusion. At least that's one of the big things that it's diagnostic for. So in other words, if you have low self-esteem, it's almost like your gas tank being low on gas. It's a gauge.

It's like you don't artificially move the needle and get more gas. It's telling you something you should know, and that's what self-esteem seems to be doing, to some extent, is telling us our social inclusion isn't very good.

Brian Krouse:

So if you improve your-

Eric Jones:

Yeah, improve your relationships, not fiddle with the needle.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, which might involve, what, just more time with others, but maybe also more giving and receiving, helping others, being helped by them, this kind of thing?

Eric Jones:

Giving and receiving. Yeah. Maybe you need to increase your social skills, all kinds of things, but the idea is you need to work on improving your connections. Those connections, again, that's sort of the key component of this relational view, is the connection with others, and if those aren't great, then it's going to show, and this seems to be what self-esteem is telling us, to some extent, anyway.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. I suppose maybe they could decouple those, because they could see how much self-esteem can you have if you're just sort of by yourself, doing your own thing, thinking highly of yourself versus you're healthily embedded in social reactions and community, and by virtue of that, you have healthy self-esteem.

Eric Jones:

Yes. In fact, other researchers, Jennifer Crocker, one of the lead ones, did some work on a long literature review on The Pursuit of Self-Esteem. And when people try to do these sort of momentary, immediate bumps in self-esteem by bragging or presenting themselves in particular ways to feel good right then, what happens is long-term, it undermines our competence, and our autonomy, and our relationships, which are sort of the three of the most core areas of human experience. And so you might feel better right then, but you're going to pay for it in the long run if you do this chronically. And you see this with people all the time, they're chasing all kinds of things to feel better about themselves and to try to look better to other people, and it doesn't go well long-term.

It just doesn't. You know these people.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. I give advice to young people to not do what they want to do, but rather, to do what they should do.

Eric Jones:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

And if you do what you want to do, and you just take it to the extreme, you'll end up in an alley somewhere with a needle in your arm, because, man, that feels good right now, but if you do what you're supposed to do, you'll have a much more fulfilling life.

Eric Jones:

Yes. Yeah, and that's the word right there for me, is fulfilling, right? What's that quote attributed to Einstein? Everything's attributed to Einstein, but it's something like, "Don't try to be a person who's a success, try to be a person who's valuable."

Robert J. Marks:

Yes.

Eric Jones:

And that fits very well with this relational view, where we should think of ourselves as resources for other people, and therefore, we want to be valuable. I'm not here to try to be a success and get all I can, and look great. That's just not the point, on the hand. I'm here to serve the rest of the body, right?

Brian Krouse:

It's interesting how ... And on the relational ontological model, the claim is, it is this way because that's how we're made.

Eric Jones:

Yes.

Brian Krouse:

It's something about our being. Yeah. And if you try to do it otherwise, if you try to just be all about the me and the individual, you're like a branch cut from the tree. You're going to wither.

Eric Jones:

Yes. And I think that's the part, I think, a lot of people don't get, is they don't make that connection back to our core nature, our core relational nature. They just see the social stuff and say, "Hey, it seems like the more of this we do, the better we are." And it's like, "Yes, but why?" Because if you connect the why, you have a much stronger foundation, and you get a lot more clarity on what social stuff is best, and you can give priority to certain things, and it all just makes much more sense.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, it makes sense. Well, there was one other study that you talked about in the chapter, that I wonder if you could go into a little bit. It sounded really interesting. It sounded like a ... It was the Harvard Grant Study.

Eric Jones:

Oh, yeah.

Brian Krouse:

It was a long-term, big cost study. It sounded like it was just very carefully done, but also had strong, clear results. Could you give us an overview of what that one was all about?

Eric Jones:

Sure. Yeah. That is one of my favorite studies, because it's different than most studies. Most studies in social psychology and other areas are what they call cross-sectional studies, which is one moment in time, and occasionally, you'll get something that's longitudinal, and they might measure things at three or four or five points in time. But rarely do you see something like the Harvard Grant Study, which started in 1938.

And I don't know if it's still running, because it was following cohorts of men who were sophomores in college in 1939, 1940, and 1941. So I'm not sure how many of them are alive, but they're following them until they're all gone, basically. And they did all sorts of quantitative and qualitative research on this. Lots and lots of data. Just reams of data on this.

They looked at physical, cognitive, emotional, and developmental data. They talked to their peers and family members, just decades of research and thousands of data points, they spent ... Well, when the book was written by George Vaillant, who's a huge name in psychology, they had spent over $20 million already at that point. And so it's a fascinating study because of how deep and rich the data are, but basically-

Brian Krouse:

Let me guess, let me guess. It was the guys with the nicest cars were happiest.

Eric Jones:

You're right, Brian. Yes. The ones who tried to artificially boost their own self-esteem were losers, actually.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah.

Eric Jones:

Yeah. They were losers. Yeah. So it's funny because you'd expect that would be really complicated outcomes of a study that collected that much data, and George Vaillant says that the whole conclusion of the study ... Are you ready? Happiness is love.

That's it. 20 million bucks, decades of research, and he says, "Happiness is love."

Brian Krouse:

Wow.

Eric Jones:

And so it all comes down to the quality, and depth, and duration of these long-term relationships that we have. If we don't have good relationships, which require all sorts of cognitive and social abilities, that we just don't have much.

Robert J. Marks:

Boy, that sure sounds like the teachings of Jesus Christ, doesn't it?

Eric Jones:

It's almost like that, yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Just like that.

Eric Jones:

But now we have data, so now we know.

Robert J. Marks:

Now, we know that Jesus was right. Okay, great.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's got to be qualified.

Robert J. Marks:

I'd tell you a little bit ... It was an interesting story. The people that take your blood are called phlebotomists. And I get in a conversation with them because I get nervous around needles and stuff, but I ask them, "What kind of people wimp out when they give blood?" And two of the ...

Ah, I don't know, maybe five that I interviewed. This might be a good psychological study, by the way, Eric. Two of them said, "It's the guys that come in with the big muscles and the tattoos." They are the ones that wimp out. So they have tried these big muscles and these tattoos in order to build their self-esteem, but when they come out, their true character comes through, and they're kind of wimps. It's very interesting.

Eric Jones:

Wow, yeah. So they're trying to compensate for what they really need, and they don't have it.

Robert J. Marks:

They don't have it. Yeah.

Eric Jones:

And it shows when they see a needle.

Robert J. Marks:

And it shows when they see them. Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Eric Jones:

Hey, I can tell you something. Do I have a second, just tell you one last thing about that?

Robert J. Marks:

Sure. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Eric Jones:

So there's some other research that didn't make the cut for the paper, the chapter, but it's so interesting to me. If we do another chapter, I'll squeeze it in there. There's some research that talks about people look ... Think about this. They're looking at a hill in front of them, an actual hill outside, and then there's other people with another person looking at the hill.

Same hill, right? So we've got two conditions, alone and with another person. And if the other person is someone you know and you hold hands with them, you perceive the incline of the hill to be less than if you're by yourself.

Robert J. Marks:

Seriously, wow.

Eric Jones:

It's as if when you're connected with another person, you have more resources available to handle whatever's coming on, which I would argue is, of course, because that's the way we're made. We're not made to do it by ... We're not self-sufficient in any respect, and so that recognition that we do have someone else connected with us, that's more of a natural state, and that's the way we should be, and when we're by ourselves, all of a sudden, things look difficult.

Brian Krouse:

What an interesting, I guess physical analogy there.

Eric Jones:

Yeah.

Brian Krouse:

You're with someone, and so you feel hopeful, right? That's kind of this abstract idea, but here, they're actually seeing the slope as less.

Eric Jones:

Yes. The mountain is not as high to climb.

Brian Krouse:

That's neat. Wow.

Robert J. Marks:

So, Eric, I want to start out with an off-topic question. My last name is Marx, Robert Marx. 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, and 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-

Robert J. Marks:

Dr. Jones.

Eric Jones:

"Dr. Jones." You call him Dr. Jones. So, yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Yeah.

Eric Jones:

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

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. It never got old either.

Eric Jones:

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

Robert J. Marks:

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

Eric Jones:

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

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, yeah, yeah. Go ahead. Sure.

Eric Jones:

Do you ever get confused with Richard Marx?

Robert J. Marks:

Richard Marx? Oh, who is Richard Marx?

Eric Jones:

He's a pop star. Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, he is? Okay, well-

Eric Jones:

Yeah. You have to look him up later.

Robert J. Marks:

Does he spell ... 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 kind of backwards.

I said, my name is Mark Roberts, and so I would wait to be called Mark Roberts. And then, I looked up on Wikipedia and I found out that Mark Roberts was the world's most famous streaker.

Eric Jones:

Oh.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah.

Eric Jones:

Wow.

Robert J. Marks:

So, yeah. Look him up. So I stopped using Mark Roberts. So just to let you know. Okay, Brian.

Brian Krouse:

All right. On that note, let's ... We were starting to get into some of the philosophical underpinnings, or at least your thoughts on this, under these different models of the person. Again, we've been talking about the atomistic model, which you mentioned is tied to materialism, and maybe it's kind of a pure materialist form of evolutionary biology, or 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 ...

So 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 dualism was where you have a mind, a material body, and an immaterial mind, somehow working together in the whole of the person. And 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 the mind. The mind of God and the mind of people is the basic underlying metaphysical reality. 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, sort of thinking through the ... 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.

Brian Krouse:

Yes.

Eric Jones:

So I'm certainly not expert there, but what I can do is sort of try to match up what I do know, like the research, and the theory, and psychology with what I understand from those models. And I guess the first sort of an overarching idea before we get into specific models would be that if you look at the research and theory in 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, and you can't hold on to materialism and naturalism, and usually what follows atomism and egoism. And so you're sort of 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?

And so I would say that's kind of where I see psychology at. And so if you're going to now match it up with a view of the mind, it's like, "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?" Right?

Brian Krouse:

That makes sense. So maybe, is it fair 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." And in some sense, that's an argument for the strength of those models, but maybe it's not like a proof or anything, it's just that they've got an affinity with one of these models more than another. And 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 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, and 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 sort of this blob of goo, and not sophisticated or complicated at all, and now, we know it's so much more complex than anyone understood back, or would have any idea. They couldn't even fathom, literally, couldn't dream of how complicated it is, and to me, that's sort of like the individual is to the relational person. The individual is closer to a blob of goo, it's more simplistic.

And although an individual is still complicated, but the relational person, so much more, because we're part of this interconnected system. It's like a single computer compared to a computer connected the 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 of ... I mean, it seems like you're putting the weight on trying to decide between these personhood views. It's a very empirical project, right? Like you're trying to not come at this ...

... an empirical project. 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 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.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:12:04]

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 as the Big Bang and all these kinds of things. And 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. And 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.

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

Brian Krouse:

And 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 illusory 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, how we fit into the social world much more in a much richer, more natural, less 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 the 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. And 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's 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. And it seems like we've completely violated that in psychology. Forget about the way things seem, let's come up with something that no one would ever think.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that's kind of 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 seem, 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 one in one direction or the other, but that the latter, the relational model, is a much more natural fit for the data and all kinds of research to support that. So, that's been very interesting.

Robert J. Marks:

You've outlined this relational person as opposed to the materialistic sort of 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 performed psychologically or psychological experiments? I don't know if you perform them psychologically or not, but could you do psychological experiments to explore the relational person, number one? And then number two, how widespread is your viewpoint? Is this accepted in the area of psychology or are you a maverick?

Brian Krouse:

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, there's really, 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 J. Marks:

Okay. Do you want to volunteer your email?

Eric Jones:

Sure. It's at ejones@regent.edu.

Robert J. Marks:

Ejones@regent.edu. We'll put that in the podcast in case anybody wants to do that. Okay.

Eric Jones:

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

Robert J. 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:

Yeah. 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. And when they made this shift, all of a sudden, everything's just broke open for like, oh, look at the findings.

Brian Krouse:

That's the big deal. Yeah.

Eric Jones:

We're finding what we've been looking for decades.

Brian Krouse:

Can you say more about that? When they shifted definitions, are you talking about how they were, what you're 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 and has something to do with how this has moved up or down. Rather, I have high or low self-esteem. And it's very much self-focused and it's very much inside the person. And then when they went outside of that and said, "Wait" and give 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." And 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:

Just 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 reconceptualize all research on the self. Well, wait, that might be going a little bit too far. He says we should question it because of this change in self-esteem. And he does admit that all the self-research, which is mountains of research, is based on philosophical assumptions that are unexamined. And I think he'd suggest, if he doesn't say it, then we should seriously consider reconceptualizing a lot of the self literature.

Brian Krouse:

Do you think, is any of that happening or how long ago was that study?

Eric Jones:

Those studies were in the '90s. In fact, I think-

Brian Krouse:

'90s? Okay.

Eric Jones:

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 still stuck in sort of this implicit individualism, and it's just not questioned much like most philosophical things. And you know this from other areas in the academy, is we're good technical experts and we're usually very poor and unaware of philosophical experts. And 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 too much.

Brian Krouse:

That's fascinating.

Eric Jones:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

So, I want to ask you about the acceptance of your thought 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 J. Marks:

I'm thinking of things which even touch or imply intelligent design. You can't get it in there. It's against consensus, and 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, and it was totally against consensus.

And so, one guy to prove it, he infected himself with the bacteria, gave himself an ulcer, and then cured himself. And 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 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? And 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. And then if I tie a 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 J. 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, and 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. And I think a lot of this 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. And 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 you turn? Those options just don't seem... It's not that they're unreasonable, they're just so far-fetched at this point that they... Like if I want to be sane I can't entertain them sort of thing.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes. Yes.

Eric Jones:

I remember a quote that I use in one of the things and one of these world renowned philosophers is saying, talking about things like the anthropic principle and that kind of stuff, and talking about fine-tuning everything he says, it says 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 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. And I think this view, this relational view, is much better supported and 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 if 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 and argument, and then I'm stuck with an atomistic egoistic person, and now, my self-esteem has to be explained primarily in terms of individualistic atomistic ideas, and that's your tool set. And so, you try to make kids happy, which everyone probably shares that goal, unless you're just really like a malevolent person, but you just lack the tools because your prior conceptual frameworks have sort of forced them out. Whereas if you have a different starting place, then suddenly, you're treating the relationships as real and primary and your focus is in the right place. It's not immediately on the self-esteem, but it's in these other things, and it can make all the difference in whether you can help someone or not. It's a very practical outcome.

Eric Jones:

Absolutely. And 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. And in our culture, those things are revered. 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. Right? 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. And 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. And 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?

Brian Krouse:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly that.

Eric Jones:

And 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 in the example of the self-esteem, they're like, "Hey, look," shifting our framework, and suddenly we can explain things so much better. So it's not that they're not trying to do the best psychology research and solve the problems. They have this constraint that's on the thinking that is preventing them from seeing a path forward. That's coming from outside the psychology data.

Eric Jones:

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

Robert J. 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. And 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. And 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 J. Marks:

Oh, you need a website, Eric.

Eric Jones:

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

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, that's great. Okay. Yeah.

Eric Jones:

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

Brian Krouse:

I know a guy.

Eric Jones:

You know a guy?

Robert J. 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 co-host Brian Krouse and me. And it's just been a delightful time. Thank you both for having this wonderful chat. So until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host, Robert J. Marks. Explore more at Mindmatters.ai. That's Mindmatters.ai. Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:34:25]