Integrating Personal Identity Into Scientific Discovery and Reasoning

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Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News.

The scientific method has undoubtedly provided great insight into the impersonal mechanics of the world around us throughout human history. However, the scientific method itself is put into practice by very personal human beings. How should our understanding of ourselves and our personal identities interact with what we learned from science?

Joining us today to talk about this and his contribution to the book, Minding the Brain is Jonathan Loose, as well as co-editor Angus Menuge. Now here's your host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your scientifically aware co-host Robert J. Marks.

We're interviewing with authors featured in the book Minding the Brain. It's edited by Angus Menuge, Brian Krouse, and yours truly. The book delves into the age-old question is the mind more than the brain. This debate spans centuries with Descartes famously equating the mind to the soul. Is the soul greater than the brain?

The book Minding the Brain has brought together well-credentialed experts from a spectrum of specialties, and I'm really proud of the diversity. People talk about diversity today. We have diversity of specialists contributing to the book, Minding the Brain. We have chapters from people in philosophy, neurosurgery, mathematics, biology, computer science, cognitive science, physics, neurology, psychology, and computer engineering. So you can see that we bring a broad spectrum of expertise to focus on this idea of the mind-brain problem.

For more information about this book, visit mindingthebrain.org. That's mindingthebrain.org.

Angus Menuge is a co-editor of Minding the Brain and is my co-host today. Angus is chair of the Philosophy Department at Concordia University. He has a PhD in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He is a very prolific author and is past president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

Welcome back, Angus. It's good to work with you again.

Angus Menuge:

Oh, thanks to have me on the show, Bob.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Angus and I today interview Dr. Jonathan Loose.

Jonathan is the author of the chapter, The Simple Theory of Personal Identity and The Life Scientific. It's a chapter in the book, Minding the Brain. Dr. Loose was senior lecturer in philosophy and psychology at the University of London until 2018. Dr. Loose holds a PhD in cognitive science from Exeter University in the United Kingdom. His recent interest had been in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of religion.

He is the co-editor with the co-host, Angus Menuge, and the esteemed philosopher J.P. Moreland of a book entitled The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism. Loose also has contributed to numerous volumes including the Discovery... I'm sorry. Including The Dictionary of Christianity and Science published by Zondervan, which is a really, really great publishing house.

Jonathan, welcome to Mind Matters News.

Jonathan Loose:

Thank you so much. Great to be here.

Robert J. Marks:

It is great.

Let's start, if you will, with an abstract of your chapter. Again, the title of your chapter in Minding the Brain is The Simple Theory of Personal Identity and The Life Scientific. Before we dig deeper, can you give us a broad overview of your chapter to let us know what's coming and then we'll dig deeper?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, sure. Thanks so much.

Fascinating chapter to write and I was delighted to be able to contribute to the book, and the chapter reflects some of the work that I've done over a number of years around the whole issue of personal identity, but here we're applying it to questions that are specific to what I describe as the life scientific.

I guess if you want to summarize the argument in a sentence, you might say that respect for science should lead us to consider all the evidence. And when we do consider all the evidence, that can lead us away from the view that all reality is physical reality. And I think that's really the centerpiece, if you like, of the chapter.

Now, of course, there's a whole structure to that, and what I really do here is to look at this issue of personal identity, which is the question of what it is that we are as persons, as human persons, as the philosophers like to say, and what does our conscious experience, what does our first personal experience of the world have to contribute to that question of what it is that we are?

Because I sense that or I see that... In the life scientific, we've seen 500 years of spectacular discovery, haven't we? Through the application of certain kinds of experimental procedures and the development of complex theories expressed mathematically and so on. This whole process applied to the world that we see, the publicly observable world that we see, and that whole process has been spectacularly productive.

And so it's really easy if it is that spectacularly productive simply to say, "Well..." And I think a lot of people do this, and I don't think it's a deliberate theoretical decision, but I think people do it. You look and you say, "Well, surely everything's like that." Science has been so productive that surely every question is a scientific question. And every answer is an answer that needs to be given in terms of the observation of publicly available phenomena using an experimental process and theoretical development expressed in mathematics.

Of course, there's a bit of a fly in that ointment and the fly in that ointment is the reality of our first personal experience. The scientist is part of reality just as much as the scientific phenomenon that the scientist wants to investigate. And so our view of the world has to accommodate not just the objects that are out there for us to look at, but also ourselves as the ones who are doing the looking and that first personal perspective that we have.

So in my chapter, what I'm trying to do is to say, "Look, if we're going to be really rigorous and committed to a spirit of scientific endeavor and achievement, then we have to be thinking about all of the evidence and all of reality, and some of that evidence and some of that reality isn't conveniently third personal, it's first personal." And so that actually has a really big impact on how we see the world.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, that's really interesting. So scientists not only look at things external to themselves, but they should also turn that inwards and look at themselves-

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

... as part of that process. Yeah. Very interesting.

Angus, what do you think?

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, no, I think that's a very important point because of course so many philosophers and scientists do think that a scientific worldview somehow requires materialism, that you have to believe that the only kind of object or the sorts of objects studied by physical sciences.

And of course, Jonathan takes his title from a BBC radio series, The Life Scientific, which featured an interview with Daniel Dennett, who died just last week, and he was a prominent defender of materialism and who thought that the scientific perspective is the only perspective. So yeah, what Jonathan is doing is saying that if you look at the mental life of scientists themselves, rather than what scientists are studying, you start to see evidence that materialism actually is not compatible with the practice of science.

And maybe just to expand on what you said so far, Jon, what are some of the characteristics of the mental life of scientists, which really are not a good fit with the materialistic worldview, but simply what is it that Dennett is missing?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah. In short, what Dennett is missing is a certain understanding or a certain aspect of consciousness. I'm just thinking specifically about Dennett and his commitments for a moment. Clearly, a spectacular thinker and a huge influence in the world, a person to whom many have looked, I think, in areas like cognitive science and AI and other areas as a champion of physicalism.

But his book, I think it was 1990, wasn't it? He published his book, Consciousness Explained, and there was a strong sense of when he published that from a lot of people that that book might've been better titled Consciousness Explained Away, because the way that then it dealt with what really seems most important to us about consciousness is he effectively denied it or excluded it from the conversation. You might say eliminated it.

And I think that this is the issue, that there's something here, something which we see in consciousness and the self and some of the ways in which we think, which is incredibly hard to accommodate on a physicalistic understanding of the world and Dennett's way. Certainly, the response of a lot of people was to say, "Dennett's way of doing that..." Which affected me to eliminate it. And this is why he was both a very prominent and impressive figure but also a highly, highly controversial one.

So when it comes to science, the things I try and address in the chapter, the applications as it were of these more general issues about consciousness come to things like observation and reasoning.

And they also come to some things that are really related to the life scientific, the life which is the aspirations and hopes that scientists might have for their future achievements. And indeed looking back and being justifiably proud of the scientific achievements which are quite clearly worthy of great esteem, those are very much features of a human life. But that also actually comes into this.

So it's about what scientists are doing when they're doing science, by which I mean observation and reasoning, theorizing, and it's about the lives of those people themselves. As in fact, an example of all human personhood and all human lives, science is a special activity but actually these arguments apply to everybody.

Angus Menuge:

All right. That's very helpful. And that shows why you connect this specifically to the issue of personal identity, including the identity of the scientists. And there are some sort of technical distinctions that you make that will probably help listeners to understand the argument.

Jonathan Loose:

Sure.

Angus Menuge:

Early on in a chapter, you make a couple of really critical distinctions. One is between what it means to be identical at a time, what is identity at a time versus over time. And then the other one is between what you call and is standardly called the simple and complex views of personal identity. So first of all, what exactly do we mean by personal identity at a time and personal identity over time?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah. No. Great questions. That's helpful, Angus. Thank you.

I think one of the things you have to come to this whole area of personal identity, first of all, you've got to ask the question of what do philosophers mean? What do we mean when we talk about personal identity? Because we often, these days, do talk about the identity of persons and when we do it, we're normally talking about somebody's roles in life, the things that gives them the life they have. I might say, "I'm a philosopher," or that I'm British or Jacob Collier fan or whatever it is. Those are the sorts of things we talk about. Who are you? What are you like and what roles do you play?

But when we're talking about personal identity here, we have a much more fundamental question that we're addressing. Not that question at all though I just illustrated, but in fact the question we might ask is what sorts of things are human persons?

And I think one way that's helpful to get a grip on that question so that we know what we're talking about is the question is what needs to exist if I am to exist? That could be a chunk of matter that my body is made of. Maybe it's that that needs to continue to exist. There's plenty of it. There should be less.

Or maybe it's not the chunk, maybe it's the biological system, this human organism, maybe it's that. If that continues to exist and whatever else is going on, I continue to exist. Or maybe as we often talk about these days and the title of the book kind of refers to maybe it's my brain, maybe that's the thing. If that continues, then I continue. Or it could be quite different. It could be something like my memories or my mind. So if I can remember what this person did last week and that person can remember what

they did the week before and there's this chain of memory and actually that chain of memory is what is me. And so long as that continues, I continue.

So those are some possible answers. It's not all of the possible answers. I don't think any of those are right actually. But it illustrates the question. It's a really fundamental question. This question of personal identity. What are we most fundamentally? Another word that philosophers use about this is the word essential. What am I essentially? And that's the existence question. So if a thing has a property that is essential, then it's a property the thing must have if it's going to continue to exist.

And so that's what we mean when we ask about personal identity. It's the question of what it is that I am in the most fundamental sense of what must exist in order for me to exist. So it has nothing to do with other things. So that, I think... You know that obviously, Angus, but I just think it's important to make that distinction because this idea of identity is so common and we talk about it in different ways.

And I think actually even scholars can get confused about that in various disciplines talking that are related to what's most important about being human. And we'll talk about personal identity in terms of what helps us to flourish, what we need for a flourishing life rather than the conversation here, which is about essentially what needs to exist in order that we exist at all, whether that is a good life, a bad life, or any other kind. So that's personal identity.

And then you made the distinction. So within that, there's then a distinction. And that distinction is actually less important than the question itself, but there are two ways we can think about what it is that we are. Two sources of two questions that help us to think about it. And one of them is to say, "Well, at any moment in time, what are the characteristics that I have that tell me something about what it is that I must be?" So just in an instant, if you like, what are the things that help me to answer that question?

And the other question is if you think about an extended period of time, you can articulate this question about personal identity in a really interesting and helpful way.

Angus, I was thinking about this and it is lovely to chat with you today and it's been a while, you were here in the U.K. with us a few years ago, and I hope you might tell me in this conversation that I'll be seeing you again in November in San Diego because we may both be at a conference together. I hope so.

Angus Menuge:

I sure hope so.

Jonathan Loose:

I sure hope so. Well, I'm planning, I'm booking my tickets, so It'll be good to see you then.

And so here's the question, here's why this is relevant, because the question is, what is it that makes the person who visited me here in the U.K. three or four years ago the same person as the person that I'll be meeting in San Diego in, say, six months' time? When you think, so many things have changed biologically and physically and psychologically for you in that period of time. So what is it that is making those persons, if you will, at those two different times, actually the same person Angus Menuge?

And that's the question of personal identity over time. And that's really... I find that the most engaging of the two questions, but both are important and both help us to shed light on what it is that we must be if we are to do the things in a moment that we do and if we're to be the people that we are across time.

Angus Menuge:

Oh, that's excellent. That's very helpful.

And as you say in your chapter where philosophers divide on answering this question is on whether they think that there is something which is simple that accounts for our identity over time or whether it's complex. Can you unpack that for us a little bit?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, sure.

So these are the possible answers to that question of personal identity to the question of what it is that we are fundamentally. And I guess the first thing to say is that the simple and complex views are not the easy and difficult views.

That's not the distinction. This distinction between simple and complex was made by Derek Parfit, a very important thinker in this whole area, and the distinction is between theories of personal identity that suggest that we are or that we consist in, as people like to say, some sort of physical or mental continuity and those that don't.

So a complex theory is a theory that views human beings as things that are made of parts that are being replaced over time. And they may be physical or they may be psychological. So I referred earlier to this idea that you might say, "Well, I'm an organism." And of course, an organism is replacing its parts over time physically. They say that we change our entire physical constitution every seven years. I don't know if that's true, but that's what's said. Certainly, we're replacing the matter that composes our body over time.

So a complex theory of personal identity will be one that says that it's the continuity of that physical entity over time. That is what we are, that constitutes us, or indeed if we do it psychologically, that it's some sort of continuity of character or memories or some combination like that.

So that's quite a common view. Those views are quite common, those complex views. And we might think there's a certain sense that they make of things. You say, "Well, I can see that when I see you in November, Angus, I'm going to recognize you, I guess." I'm going to see this person, I'm going to see this physical thing in front of me and that's going to tell me that it's you. So it feels like physical continuity may have something to do with that. And then we'll talk about this conversation and other things and there'll be memories that come through and we'll make some of the same old jokes and probably, it will feel like there's a continuity there. And this tells us this is good evidence for who we are.

And so that's a complex view of personal identity would say that good evidence of who we are is actually that is who we are. That is what makes us the people that we are.

A simple view by contrast is one that... Well, it doesn't actually specify what it is that we are, but we're not that. So Parfit uses the phrase that there is some further fact that explains what I consist in.

So if you take a view that there's some immaterial, significant immaterial aspect to who we are or part to what we are, then you are taking a simple view, because you are grounding what it is that we are in something which is not part of that physical or psychological continuity that's out there in the world for everyone to see.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. That's very helpful. And of course, one of the issues is whether we privilege what you might call the outside view. People impressed with science are always wanting to say it's the impersonal, publicly observable data or the inside view, introspection, which you mentioned is very important that... Why is

it that some just don't take the evidence of introspection seriously? Because it's obviously very relevant to our intuitions about things like personal identity.

Jonathan Loose:

I think it's an interesting one, isn't it? It's what I was alluding to at the start when we were talking about Dennett and so on.

People sometimes use the term scientism. I don't use that term in the chapter. It suggests that people have taken a cold hard look at what kind of evidence is important and have made some sort of decision to eschew first-person experience and simply to focus on third-person data. And I don't think it's quite like that. I think it's much more.

And I understand this, that there's a mood that gets created by the success of the scientific method when it's applied to the things that science has explored so productively. And that massive success over five centuries has been so staggering and scientific activity normally looks a certain way and investigates a certain type of things.

And so it's understandable that folks will quite easily get into a mood, as it were, in which we think that not only does our understanding of the world of publicly observable objects benefit enormously from an experimental method and theorizing and so on. But that the acquisition of any and all knowledge about the world or reality has got to come that way. And the inquiry has got to have that sort of look and feel to it.

So anything that doesn't utilize that method or any conversation about things which are not publicly observable objects, which are first-person or in nature, it just doesn't seem to fit this success story and therefore, it gets pushed out. But the inconvenient truth of course is that we do have first-person perspectives that somehow our conscious experience and our inner lives are a part of reality, so we have to take them seriously.

So I have great sympathy, not in a patronizing sense, but great understanding for those who struggle to want to incorporate first-person experience. But of course, it's there. We know that. We know for ourselves better than we know anything else that we have first-person experience of the world. And so we can't have a view of the world that excludes it.

So I think it's a scientific spirit that tells us that we can't ignore or eliminate aspects of reality that don't suit the way that we've been gathering information to date. We have to start with all the data, see what sorts of answers are adequate to fit all the data, and if we want to know, we've got to do that. And so in that sense, we do need to include introspective data.

I do hesitate a little bit on the word introspection just because introspection has been used historically for all sorts of things that didn't work out. You can look at the 19th century psychologists and their introspective psychology and sitting in a chair and thinking, "Now I'm thinking, so how am I doing that?" And trying to work out what's going on when I'm thinking just introspective. I don't think that's not what we're talking about here.

But certainly, the fact that we have a first-person perspective and the broad characteristics of our thinking are really important to make sense of in terms of our grasp of reality.

Angus Menuge:

And interestingly, you say following Charles Taliaferro, you point out that even in science itself, you can't really pit scientific data against introspection when you think about what the scientist is actually doing. Could you explain that point? It's a very interesting one.

Jonathan Loose:

Of course the point is that we were coming at the world from a first-person perspective and therefore, the observations we make, the reasoning we do, we only know that world through our own first-person perspective on that world. And even in doing anything, in doing science, we are reliant on that perspective and what comes to us that way.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. That's very helpful.

Let's maybe start looking at the first part of personal identity, the identity at a time, and you refer to some very distinguished work by Tim Bayne on The Unity of Consciousness. And he talks specifically, there's many kinds of unity and we can't get into all of those, but just the phenomenal unity and why that seems, at least, to require a simple subject.

Jonathan Loose:

So much has been written about consciousness. We can't, as you say, delve into the breadth of it.

But it's important to say that when we're talking about consciousness, what we're interested in here is what is typically captured in that phrase. There's something that it's like to be in a conscious state. And it's that something that it is like that is what we're talking about here when it comes to consciousness, which is what's termed phenomenal consciousness. Yeah, that's why we talk about the phenomenal unity of consciousness, the unity of consciousness in its phenomenal aspect.

Angus Menuge:

And of course, one would think that if there's this unified conscious field that we have, we have this total awareness of things, it's not that we have lots of different subjects, one for each experience, but it seems as if there's one subject of all of these experiences, and yet people like Bayne follow Dennett and make this remarkable claim that the self is a fictional object and that somehow that's what unifies the conscious field. What on earth are they saying? Because I would warrant that the ordinary person on the street doesn't believe this. So what are they saying?

Jonathan Loose:

It's interesting, isn't it?

I think what Bayne wants to do more than anything is to... He has this understanding of the unity of consciousness, and perhaps I should say a bit more about that and what that means, and then that leads him to a particular view of what it is that we are.

It's that process that I was talking about earlier where you say, "Well, what are the characteristics of our conscious life at a particular moment? And what does that then mean for who it is that we are?" And I think the characteristics we're talking about here is the sense in which when we are having a particular experience, there'd be many, many components as it were to that, many different things.

When I wrote the chapter, I was sitting in our lounge at home and I just looked around and in our little garden, I could see a bird flying over the lawn, and I could hear in the kitchen that lunch was being prepared and I could hear this bird and see it and so on flying across, and I was thinking about the chapter, and all of that, all those different types of experience were being had simultaneously.

You can think about the different parts of that and think about just the bird for a minute, this bird that's flying, I can see it and I can hear it, but I don't have one experience of bird song, another experience of a

patch of color moving across the visual scene. What I have is an experience of a bird and the aspects of that experience include the sound and the vision.

And you can even extend that because there wasn't... There's a little group of homunculi in my head each having different experiences, one of the garden and one of the kitchen and one of the book, and there's one self and there's one experience. And what it seems very powerfully to be to us and what Bayne wants to argue for is that our phenomenal consciousness, that's something that it is like to be in that mental state, is unified in the sense that all of these different parts are aspects of a single experience that I'm apprehending the world in a moment. So if that's true, if consciousness is unified in that way, then that has some interesting consequences.

And one of the things that I think Bayne would like to be the case, but ultimately rejects, is the idea that the unity of this conscious field is such a striking and important aspect of our experience that it would hopefully mean that we just are this conscious field. That's what we are. Because if we are unified in that way, then we're the right kinds of subjects for all of this experience.

So there's a real importance being placed on the conscious field itself. But Bayne rejects that because he says, "No. There are moments, for example, if you're in a dreamless sleep or something like that where you're not conscious, and to say that I am my consciousness would mean that in those moments I simply don't exist." So he doesn't want to say that. Existence isn't gappy in that way. We know we exist when we're asleep. We're just not conscious. So therefore that means we are not the same. We can't be identified with the conscious field.

He toys with some other possible answers, but ultimately comes to this view that he describes as virtual phenomenalism, which I guess we want to dig into that, Angus. Is that right?

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, yeah. The self in some sense is a fiction, it's an intentional object, and you do two things. You explain this strange view and then point out that it has a whole number of very counterintuitive implications, but you say it's an "astonishing" position. Can you help us understand that?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, I think it is pretty astonishing.

I have to say, I think what... Bayne writes about the unity of consciousness is really, really helpful, and this notion that we have a single conscious state that subsumes all of the different aspects of the experience we're having, that seems to me intuitively to be right and therefore to be important in telling us about what it is that we are. But no, Bayne goes for this virtual phenomenalism view.

That's the idea that... He talks about the cognitive architecture that underlies a stream of consciousness so that if you like the cognitive machinery that is producing our experience, that is responsible for our experience, and he takes a view which is not dissimilar as he points out to a view that Daniel Dennett took, to go back to him, which is that there's a sense in which the self is a center of gravity within this stream of consciousness that is created by the cognitive architecture.

So in order to integrate all of these experiences, the system as it were, this is my inference from reading what Baune has to say, the system has to create a focal point for all of this experience to come together. And it's that focal point that is me. So what I am therefore is I'm a construction of the cognitive system. I don't exist in any way beyond that.

And you could say, as Bayne wants to say, that the cognitive system creates a representation of the self. And he talks a lot about this notion of they say representation and that the self represents itself to itself. But there's a sense overall of the whole thing trying to pull itself up by its own bootstraps and bring into

existence a self within the conscious field to account for our experience of the unity of consciousness. But this thing, of course, is, as it were, maybe it's helpful to say, authored by the cognitive system, in the same sense that an author like Agatha Christie might create a character like Hercule Poirot. So the cognitive system creates this self.

And so what's really astonishing about this view, although it seems for all sorts of reasons to buy, Bayne, things he wants to buy in terms of our understanding of ourselves. The cost of this view is that we take a step and we say that the self only exists in a virtual sense and that, of course is the problem, because we're really saying on that view that there's no difference in the manner of existence of Agatha Christie compared to the manner of existence of Poirot, because these two are... One is both, the author is herself, a fiction created by the cognitive system, and she is then creating a fiction which is a character in a book. So this seems to be really quite startling.

Angus Menuge:

And you point out as well, it does great violence in our very routine person-related sentences, like you mentioned, that I'd be the same person that you met years ago if we rejoin in San Diego, sentences like, "I'm tired," or "I saw Jon five years ago." What happens to all of those ordinary sentences that people uncorrupted by philosophy routinely operate?

Jonathan Loose:

Yes, indeed. People are uncorrupted by philosophy. Absolutely. Yeah.

If we say something about something that doesn't actually exist, then that sentence is false. So here's a silly example. I might say, "Unicorns eat daisies for breakfast," or I might say the opposite, "Unicorns do not eat daisies for breakfast." They're both ridiculous sentences, I grant you that. But they're both strictly false. And the reason they're both strictly false, even though they contradict each other, is of course because there are no unicorns. So it is neither true to say that they do or don't eat breakfast. And if we're talking about... If we're making statements about things whilst also holding that those things don't exist, then those sentences are strictly speaking false.

And you see this in the area of moral philosophy where some philosophers famously propose that there are no moral facts. And the consequence of that is that all moral statements become systematically false, that there may be other reasons to utter them on that view, maybe other reasons to say something is good or bad or right or wrong. But those statements, as a matter of fact, are systematically false.

Once we move to this idea that the self is a construction of the cognitive system, which has only a virtual existence and doesn't exist in any real sense, as Bayne puts it as clearly as that, we are then saying, if I say, "Yeah, I'm tired," or whatever it is, we are uttering statements that are strictly speaking false, which just doesn't seem right at all. Does it?

Angus Menuge:

Right. And so what about the alternative then? What if we say, as so many philosophers and theologians have said in history, that there is an immaterial substance? What difference would that make in our understanding of phenomenal unity and the way that we talk about ourselves?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah. Well, so first of all, in taking that step, however we construe what it might mean to be an immaterial thing, and that's not something I address in the chapter, but let's take that thought, of

course, you're instantly saying that the self is something that exists in a very full sense. It exists as what philosophers would call a substance, as a thing. There is something which is the self, and that self is independent and separate from the stream of conscious experience. But what you're also saying, and what's historically often been said about the idea of an immaterial self is that it's a simple... A simple meaning a thing that is not self-composed of parts.

Now, what's interesting about that is that a thing which is itself not composed of parts would be the ideal sort of thing to be the subject of an experience that comes to us in this unified way. So if an immaterial thing is able to be complex in terms of its capacities and its properties but is simple in terms of its composition, then we can see that as being very readily the sort of thing that would be the subject of the kind of unified, phenomenal experience that we find ourselves to be subject to.

And so it becomes quite an attractive view as compared with... What Bayne is struggling for, I think, is some sort of view, which doesn't go down that route, because there's a desire not to entertain the notion of immaterial substances and so on. And so trying to find another account of ourselves that comports with the unity of consciousness, but the cost of that, as I say, is the reality of the self in a very strong sense. And so this other alternative gives Bayne what he wants, I think, but does so without that cost.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. Well, so to round out this first episode before, and the next one we'll get into, the identity over time, what does the unity of consciousness have to do with scientific discovery? You give the example of Arthur Eddington's discovery that light from a distant star was bent around the sun.

And another issue that's critical to science is what does the unity of consciousness have to do with logical insights, such as the insight, "Oh, this is a prediction of my theory, it follows from my theory." Can you help us see why this would do real work in science itself if we recognize some kind of substantial conscious subject?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, absolutely.

This comes down to what I was saying earlier about the parts of thinking that science, relevant if you like, to which this conversation also has something to contribute. When we make observations, we apprehend directly, I think, the relations between things in a scene. So when I looked out at the garden is, going back to that experience that I talk about in the chapter, the position of the hedge and the bird and the lawn, the different things, those are things that you apprehend directly as you experience that single holistic field, conscious field. And so we, as it were, can read off our observations from that.

We think about direct apprehension of reality and of course, we put great weight on that because we take observation to be decisive in terms of the steps that we will take in our theorizing. We say that we know things because we observe them. And if we do, if we're going to have this direct apprehension, then given all that we've said over this episode, we see that we need to be the kinds of things that can have that direct apprehension, that can make sense of what's going on in a complex conscious field, if you like, a conscious experience that's coming from being mediated from the physical world.

So you take the example of the discovery of light being bent and the comparison of the positions of the stars either in the night sky or during an eclipse, an absolutely marvelous experiment of course, which is so important in the history of physics and just beautifully designed and so on, back there in 1919, I think it was a hundred years ago, but just marvelous thing.

But it's just a really good example of a comparison of different observations. And in order to make that comparison, it demands that we are able to apprehend directly the experience that we're having and then to be able to say something about it. And in order to take that as authoritative, we need to have great confidence in our ability to do that. And this is what an account of the person enables us to do. That's, I think, what I want to say about observation.

Do you want to talk about logic as well?

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, yeah. Logic in the sense, now we're talking about at time, so we're not talking about reasoning over time, but at the same time what happens when you basically see, as C.S. Lewis puts it in Miracles, one thing implies or entails another. Why is an immaterial subject relevant to that kind of experience?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah. I do refer to Lewis in the chapter as well, although of course this goes right the way back to Boethius, I think, this distinction between intellectus and ratio and so on, an understanding of what understanding itself really is.

But yes, I think that the point here is simply that if we're going to be driven by the logic of an argument, if it's going to be the premises taken together that lead us inexorably to deduce something on the basis of them together, then we have to apprehend them together. And it's in apprehending different premises simultaneously that we then are able to, as it were, sense that logical compulsion to draw a particular conclusion.

And so in our theorizing as well as in our observation, we need to take into account multiple entities simultaneously and that holistic experience, if you like, of either an argument in the different premises that are part of that or an observation and the different parts of that, and that's what enables us to make authoritative statements about what we observe and to be compelled by logic to take certain steps in our theorizing.

That's why being the kinds of beings that can make sense of these unified conscious experience and have these unified conscious experiences is necessary for us to be the kinds of things that can do science with all the wonderful things that flow from that.

Angus Menuge:

All right. That's excellent. Thank you, Jon. That really helps us to understand the importance of what it means to be a person at a time and what's at stake in comparing the simple and complex views there.

And so in the next show, what we're going to be looking at is the issue of personal identity over time and what difference that makes whether one takes a materialistic view of persons or one of the alternatives.

All right. Welcome back and on the last episode as we were exploring this topic of personal identity with Dr. Jonathan Loose, we were focusing especially on personal identity at a time. In this show, we're going to be looking instead at what it means to be a person over time. What maintains identity then?

You argued that the complex view of personal identity based on continuity faces several serious problems. And maybe we could just focus on two of those. First of all, you point out that Richard Swinburne and others have come up with thought experiments in which there is psychological or neurological continuity or both. And yet that fails to explain our intuitions about personal identity and that suggests that the self can't be reduced to that kind of continuity but is, as you said before, a further fact. Could you give an example of this sort of thought experiment and explain the basic problem for the complex view that's being posed here?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, sure.

Of course, most of the time when we talk about personal identity, remember there's this question of what it is that we are most fundamentally. Most of the time when we talk about personal identity, I might say, "I had a headache yesterday," and when I say that, I'm saying I am the same person as the person who had a headache yesterday, I'm making identity claim there.

Well, when I do that, normally, the claim I'm making is consistent with what we call the complex view of personal identity, because the person who had the headache yesterday is psychologically continuous with me. I have memories of that person and so on and so forth, similar character and so on. And they're also physically continuous with me. That person... There's a chain, I'm probably still composed of the vast majority of the same matter that that person was composed of yesterday.

So normally speaking, when we talk about personal identity, the complex view is a view that works. And so therefore, you might say, "Well, okay, so maybe that's what I am then. Maybe what I am is simply this chain of physical continuity or of psychological continuity or both or something like that." And of course, that's what the complex view is asserting.

So if we're going to challenge that, what we have to do is to find some sort of scenario in which our intuitions, as you said, Angus, about personal identity, come apart from the physical and psychological continuity. Because if that can happen, if there can be a situation in which... We know all the physical and psychological facts and they point to a particular conclusion, but our intuition is that the conclusion is a different one, then we have questions about whether that view is adequate to account for personal identity. That's why we end up with these thought experiments.

Let me give you... I'll give you two maybe and that will just help to clarify this in the minds of folks for whom this is fresh. As you said, Richard Swinburne gives a particular thought example when he is discussing this.

Imagine this situation. Due to a brain disease, I have my right brain hemisphere replaced with one taken from a clone of me who has slightly different memories and character traits to my own. I've just had half my brain removed and replaced with something that's slightly different and that it causes a slightly different character and memories and so on. So the result of the operation then is this person who's going to be psychologically and physically similar to both me as I was and to this clone. Okay.

So then imagine a couple of years later, sadly, the disease recurs this time to the other hemisphere, the left hemisphere of the brain, and the same procedure needs to take place except with the other hemisphere. So both hemispheres have now been replaced. And so the resulting person is both physically and psychologically quite different from the person I was right at the start. But there is this relationship.

And so the question is whether that final person who is the result of these two operations is the same person as me. In short, have I survived these operations or is there just somebody there who's similar to me but it's actually a different person?

I guess, I don't know, Angus, you might agree with me, I don't know that, it's pretty ambiguous, the outcome of that. And that's really the intent of the story is to make us think, yeah, we don't know the answer to that question. We don't know whether we've survived or not.

And if you think, obviously, we have survived, then you can just adjust the story a bit to increase the amount of physical and psychological change. Or if you think we obviously haven't survived, then you can make it a bit less. And so there's this zone of uncertainty. There's a vagueness we might say around the answer to the question.

So if that's true, if we get to that situation and there's a vagueness there, then the problem is that we know all of the physical and psychological facts, we have all that information there, and yet the answer to the question of whether I have survived or not is still indeterminate. And so that would then imply that those physical and psychological facts, those facts about physical and psychological continuity are not sufficient to determine whether or not I have survived and therefore, my identity, what it is that I am most fundamentally, is not actually constituted by those facts but by something else.

That's one example of a thought experiment that Swinburne uses around this. Maybe that's sufficient just to get the point across that we can describe a situation in which despite knowing all of the relevant physical and psychological facts, the question of personal identity remains unclear, undecided, unknown, and that therefore our identity isn't constituted by those facts.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, that's very helpful. And there are other ones too where you seem to have equal psychological and physical continuity with two individuals.

Jonathan Loose:

So you might say one hemisphere of my brain is transplanted into a waiting brain, stem and body, and another hemisphere of my brain is transplanted into a third waiting brain, stem, and body. And so you then have these two individuals who we might say are in terms of the way they behave and who they are and their physical continuity with me, they're both identical. And so which one is me? And we have these kinds of scenarios that can be set up, which really helped to illustrate the inadequacy of physical and psychological continuity to account for our identity over time.

Angus Menuge:

Right. Because we are confident that two things cannot be one thing.

Jonathan Loose:

Exactly.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. It seems as if you could make an equally good case. So yeah, those are real problems.

The other one, though, that you mentioned that is really quite down to earth and doesn't require sophisticated thought experiments has to do with what you call the paradigm cases of person related language, which you mentioned in a previous episode.

My favorite is Jon is the same person who suggested the basic idea of the Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism in a coffee shop in San Francisco.

Jonathan Loose:

Well, Angus, I'm very committed to the thought that that book arose between us.

Angus Menuge:

Very good.

Jonathan Loose:

And there's been a succession of events from there that led to it having enormous strength, I think, and value. And yeah, that's been a terrific project just as this Minding the Brain book is another terrific project to be involved with. But yeah, no, it's had to come to your example, I suppose. Yeah. This is another point that Swinburne talks about actually.

And the example I just gave you where physical and psychological continuity come apart from questions of personal identity. As I said, it's hardly what we'd call a paradigm case of personal identity is these strange ideas, thought experiments about these operations and brain transplants and so on.

The more usual cases are the kind of cases that I just gave a moment ago. Like if I say, "I had a headache yesterday," in those cases, these things do seem to line up. Swinburne argues that these paradigm cases are what we find in the many sentences from which we learn to talk about personal identity and all of these paradigm cases, that's the way we normally talk about personal identity are cases in which physical and psychological continuity do make sense of it.

And so that means that a complex view is a possible understanding of the situations and the words from which we learn about it, but it's not really the understanding that is implicit in those examples. So what do I mean by that?

Well, imagine I say that sentence, "I had a headache yesterday," so I'm referring... I'm not trying to refer to someone with whom I'm psychologically and physically continuous, but rather I'm referring to me. I'm referring to the self of which I'm directly aware continuing to exist over time. So when I say, "I had a headache yesterday," it's got nothing to do with identifying that there was somebody there yesterday who is me, and that was the person that had a headache. It's got everything to do with me knowing directly and being aware of the fact that yes, there is a me who continues through time and who had a headache yesterday as a direct awareness.

As I put it in the chapter, the complex theories can offer a coherent analysis of personal identity as it's typically used, but it's not the one that's implicit in those paradigm examples through which we learn about it, that the deeper sense and what we're really talking about is the simple theories sense about direct awareness of ourselves as enduring subjects of experience.

That, I think, is a really interesting account because it gives due, consideration, I think, to the complex theories and why the complex theory might be one that is turned to by a number of thinkers. But it also then emphasizes the overarching point, which is that that's not really what we're doing when we learn about, talk about experience situations in which personal identity is relevant. What we really refer to, as you say, Angus, as you said in the last episode, those people who are uncorrupted by philosophy, what they're referring to is that ongoing sense of being a self who is continued over time and who was, in this case, the person who had the headache.

It is an interesting point, I think, and helpful in this discussion.

Angus Menuge:

And if one thinks of Thomas Reid who spoke of common sense, not meaning horse sense, but the original and natural stock of judgments that people make, one can make the case from those paradigm cases that the simple view agrees with common sense, but the complex view is really a revisionist theory. In other words, it's asking us to believe that we've discovered something new that actually falsifies the ordinary ways that we make these judgments. Well, someone might say, "Well then, it happens, doesn't it? We come up with better theories." But you argue that in a way that gives a reason to prefer the simple view of personal identity. Can you help us understand the thinking there?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah. I think it does.

It's not what I would call a knockdown argument, that one. I think that's fair to say. But certainly if the basic understanding that we have of ourselves when we come to personal identity is this simple sense of things, then you're right, we are replacing that with an alternative if we turn to a complex theory. And it isn't the sense that's implicit in the examples that we use, it's not the sense that we are referring to when we make use of personal identity language.

I just think it's important to see that this simple view is by no means a strange alternative, but rather it's the default position. And as we've seen for the other arguments, the thought experiments and so on, this revisionist view is also unable to make sense of our intuitions in those cases. Whereas of course, the simple view is much better at being able to do that. So why take a revisionist alternative?

Angus Menuge:

That makes a lot of sense.

And then it also applies to science itself. In fact, you give a couple of arguments to show that what scientists do is best explained by the idea that the same self persists over time. One of them going back to Edmund Husserl concerns the idea of fulfillment structures. What exactly are they and what does that all have to do with being the same person over time?

Jonathan Loose:

When it comes to scientific practice, I think the main point here is one that extends to the whole chapter, which is that reflection on personal identity does indicate that a simple view offers a better account of what it is that we are, and that then has implications for what it is that our lives consist of, of what our observation is, of what reasoning is.

Scientific activity is a particular specialized type of human activity. And so we can see there are applications of these general points in the scientific domain. I think I want to say that this is a broader point about all human existence and experience, but it does have special application where we have a special concern for things like observation and reasoning and achievement and all the rest of it.

Yeah. Turning to fulfillment structures is just really a term for a series of experiences that one must have in order to verify a claim or to fulfill a request. So I could pick up on an example given by J.P. Moreland of simply verifying whether a chair on the other side of the room has a scratch on it. Seems pretty trivial, but there it is. There's a series of observations that you need to make as you move over and look the other side of the chair, if you're going to be able to claim that you've directly verified this question of whether or not the chair has a scratch on it.

And so the fulfillment structure is that set of experiences. And of course, it's going to be very important if you're going to be able to directly verify this incredibly important question. It's going to be very important that it's the same person that has each of those experiences in order that you then are not simply effectively having one person report to another each aspect of this. So there needs to be the persistence of a single individual over time in order for there to be the verification or the answer to the request that's given.

Angus Menuge:

So if we think about scientific prediction and testing, how does this idea of a persistent self apply to that? What does that have to do with personal identity over time?

Jonathan Loose:

I think if you take any prediction, in order to test that prediction, you're going to need to take a series of steps, a series of observations, and you're going to want to be in a position of being able to say that you've verified that claim.

And so if you're going to have that direct observational evidence that we talked about in the last episode as well, then it's going to need to be the direct experience of one individual rather than simply a series of experiences had by different individuals existing at different moments. And so there has to be a persistent individual running through that whole experience in order that you can make a prediction, go out and test it, bring back the evidence, and then make an authoritative claim that you have actually answered the question, refuted the point, or whatever it is that you've been predicting, you'll be able to do.

Angus Menuge:

Good. And of course, a lot of science involves reasoning, doesn't it? In fact, Einstein, a lot of his discoveries involved thought experiments where he had to reason out logically how could I show that a couple of theories that seem to contradict each other are in fact consistent.

And if you think about the process of reasoning over time, why is it that many philosophers, I think this point goes back to Kant, but certainly C.D. Broad and others, they've made the point that reasoning seems to require the persistence of the self over time. Why is that? And could you give an example?

Jonathan Loose:

Well, previously we said that in order for the logic of an argument, to get a direct grip on us, we've got to apprehend all of the premises simultaneously so that we can effectively see the contradiction or what logically follows from that. So here we see that comprehension can come over time as we pull together the different premises or components of something in order to understand it. Again, it must be the same person that is the subject of the argument at each moment if we're going to be able to do that.

So in the chapter, I compare it, just to clarify it, to the understanding of a sentence. You might read each word, each element of the sentence, one piece at a time, but you're ultimately coming to an understanding of the thought conveyed by the whole. We can only claim to have understood directly the sentence if it's the same person who has read each word, so that we're, again, dependent on some sort of account of persons that persist over time in order to do that.

Angus Menuge:

When we think about the credit that scientists are given when they're awarded Nobel Prizes or other honors, it sure seems as if suppose they make a prediction decades ago and then finally we figure out a way of verifying the prediction, it seems as if when we give that prize, we're assuming that it was the same person who made the prediction who is now being vindicated. Otherwise, it would seem odd as if we might be giving the prize to the wrong person.

And people have made this point about Richard Dawkins on his materialistic view. Why is he showing up to get accolades for his books or receiving royalty checks when according to him, he didn't actually write the book-

Jonathan Loose:

He wasn't the person who did the work in the first place.

Angus Menuge:

So it seems that whatever people might say theoretically, a practical challenge, admittedly it's not a logical refutation, would be to say, "Well, hang on, if our philosophy is to be consistent with our life, don't we have to favor some philosophy that makes sense of those sorts of experiences?"

Jonathan Loose:

Well, absolutely right.

If I'm going to be a young scientist who's got great ambitions for achievements in the future, or someone as you say, looking back at the things that have been achieved and wanting to receive the accolades and no doubt, a few royalty checks along the way and things like that for what's been written or achieved, then that only makes sense if indeed the person looking forward is the same person who will do the things, or the person looking backward is the same person who has done them.

And so we need to have an understanding of ourselves that's consistent with the activity that we are involved with. Otherwise, we're taking one view in life and another view in our world view, if you like, or our perspective on how life should be understood. And these things have to line up. There can't be an inconsistency there.

And I think that's why, as we've been talking about this chapter as a whole, I've wanted to emphasize that these points, they certainly are relevant for the practice of science. If we're going to make real sense of what it means to reason, if we're going to make real sense of what it means to observe, if we're going to do that, given the holistic nature of the unified nature of consciousness, then we need to think very carefully about what it is that we are.

But actually, that goes for all observation and it goes for all reasoning, and it goes for all aspiration and all senses of achievement. So this question of personal identity really is a very, very important one. The question "What am I?" has significant impact in every area. And so yeah, it's an important thing to wrestle with.

I think bringing us back to where we started, we were talking about Daniel Dennett's book and his work, which is a brilliant writer and has contributed so much and been valued by so many, and yet the answer he had, with regard to consciousness, was essentially to say that what doesn't fit with a naturalistic, materialistic approach is something that we need to explain away rather than to explain.

And I think there's a different orientation that many of us would want to take respectfully to that, which is simply to say that no, we need to start with an understanding of the world that can accommodate all of the data, that can accommodate both our first-person perspectives and what it means to be conscious persons, as well as accommodate all that we learn as we look at the world of public objects and apply scientific methods in our understanding of those.

This, I think, is the really crucial point about this whole area of personal identity.

Angus Menuge:

It's much like the point that Thomas Nagel makes in Mind and Cosmos. He says that essentially in our attempt to give a comprehensive account of reality, we ultimately have to include the inquirer and not just what the inquirer is inquiring into.

Jonathan Loose:

Absolutely.

And it's understandable, Angus, that you might, if your great concern is to be observing in the world. It's so easy, isn't it? When something is so ever present as our own selves for it to fade into the background,

to be a Ganzfeld, that is just... We cease to be aware of. We cease to remember that we are actually a part of the reality that we are investigating. And I think it's just the reminder that not only that we are part of that reality, but also that being part of that reality has enormous consequences for the way that we understand it.

Angus Menuge:

Well, to wrap this up, looking at your chapter as a whole, which by the way is a marvelous chapter, what do you hope that working scientists and the many others who esteem science should conclude after reading your chapter? What's the big takeaway that you hope they might draw?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah. Thanks.

I think that love for science doesn't imply believing that all of reality must be physical reality. And in fact, love for science should imply considering all of the evidence, and it includes that messy first personal, phenomenal stuff that we might rather ignore or deny just to make things work out a bit neater given what we already think we know. I think it's that sense that no, we are facing a reality that is so rich, that sometimes we have to deal with some things that are a little bit more inconvenient in our worldview and in our understanding of what reality must be.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. In fact, I myself look forward to having another coffee with you in San Diego this November, which I tend to think is most naturally explained by the simple view of personal identity.

Jonathan Loose:

Well, me too, Angus, and I hope we can have that coffee. And if the Blackwell Companion, The Substance Dualism came out of coffee in San Francisco, I wonder what might come out of coffee in San Diego this year. I trust something new and something quite special.

Angus Menuge:

I hope so too.

This has been a delight and I thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. Again, it's a marvelous chapter, which I hope gets a very wide readership.

Jonathan Loose:

Thank you, Angus. It's great to be with you. Thank you.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes. Can you hear me now?

Jonathan Loose:

Yes.

Angus Menuge:

Yes. Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

That's great.

Guys, okay, the world needs to know that during this podcast here in Waco, Texas, we had a tornado warning. I had to leave the podcast for a while. So that's why I've been so silent for a while.

Now, guys, this is amazing. Jonathan is in Great Britain. Angus is in Wisconsin. Austin Egbert, who's coordinating, this is in Kansas, and I'm in Waco, Texas. We're all talking together like we're in the same room. It's just astonishing. It's amazing when all of the parts work together, but I didn't anticipate a tornado warning in the middle of the podcast.

Yeah. Thank you, Jonathan. This was really great. I tell you...

I want to summarize my takeaway from this podcast and the last podcast and that is that scientist examining scientist is a meta sort of phenomena. You're turning yourself back in on looking at yourself. And meta phenomena is really, really weird and it has applications in some mind-bending places like girdle, for example. The whole thing was self-refuting. And then taking down self-refuting statements like there is no truth. Well, is that truth?

And like you pointed out, that we, as human beings, can understand understanding. We know about knowing and we also know about the unknowable. In computer science, we have something which is called Chaitin's number, which you can prove that exists, but you can also prove that it's unknowable. We know about the unknowable. And in my area of artificial intelligence, this relates to the fact that artificial general intelligence will never have this meta ability. So that I think is a bump in the road for getting general artificial intelligence that's going to take over the world.

Although I asked ChatGPT to make a joke and I said, "I don't use ChatGPT because..." And then I said, "Finish it with something funny." And then he says, "Because I'm afraid that ChatGPT would become self-aware and start to give sarcastic answers. Oh, wait a minute. Too late." So that was a statement that folded-

Jonathan Loose:

It's not bad.

Robert J. Marks:

Huh?

Jonathan Loose:

It's not bad for an AI.

Robert J. Marks:

No. It isn't bad. It isn't bad. It was frankly hilarious. And it did have this phenomenon of examining itself but, yeah, artificial intelligence is never going to have that capability.

Well, thank you, Jonathan. This was a really great time and enjoyed it and please know that I was using Bluetooth earphones, so I listened to the whole thing in my tornado room. So this is great.

So we've been talking to Dr. Jonathan J. Loose, who is the author of the chapter, The Simple Theory of Personal Identity and The Life Scientific in the book, Minding the Brain. And my co-host has been Angus Menuge, he's chair of the Philosophy Department at Concordia University at Wisconsin. And this has been a great time together. Thank both of you, gentlemen.

Until next time on Mind Matters News, 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.

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