

Dr. Angus Menuge: Unity of Consciousness (Part III)

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep135>

Robert J. Marks:

We all appear to have a single consciousness. Why not two or three consciousnesses in a single person? What's going on here? Well, that's the topic today on Mind Matters News.

Announcer:

Welcome to Mind Matters News, where artificial and natural intelligence meet head-on. Here's your host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

We hear of Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, dual personalities, but most of us only have one consciousness. What's the deal here? Why do we display a so-called unity of consciousness? Returning to talk about this is Dr. Angus Menuge. He's a professor and chair of philosophy at Concordia University. Angus, welcome. Welcome back.

Angus Menuge:

Thanks for having me again.

Robert J. Marks:

You're very, very welcome. We're really honored to have you. Angus, if you haven't read any of his stuff is wickedly smart and we're just honored to talk to him. Let me start out the questioning. What is the so-called unity of consciousness? It's an area in philosophy, is that right?

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. Going back a very long way. It's mentioned by Plato and Aristotle, and later on by Kant, some of the great minds. It's the issue that there seems to be a remarkably singular conscious field. So we can have many experiences concurrently. So when you see a sunset, you hear the whooping of cranes go by, you smell the aroma of coffee and you feel the wind going through your hair. And yet all of those are unified in one conscious field. So it's not as if there is one consciousness witnessing the sunset, another consciousness hearing the cranes, another one feeling the wind, another one's smelling to coffee. No, they are all experiences metaphorically located within one field of consciousness.

Angus Menuge:

And this problem has become even more remarkable as we know more about the brain because we now know that the brain is a highly distributed, it's a parallel distributed system. And we know that even with just one object, I mentioned before, the example of that blue ball that's bouncing. Well, the part of the brain that's concerned with color, and the part of the brain which is concerned with shape, and the part that's concerned with motion are all different. And yet we integrate that and we are conscious of one object. So there's a unity, both in the sense that many experiences belong to one consciousness, but also that we experience objects and activities as integrated parts within that experience.

Robert J. Marks:

That is fascinating. I've learned about, what was it? It's called a split-brain operation where people that are epileptic sometimes go in for operations. The neurosurgeon goes in and separates the right and left hemispheres. Because I guess what happens as I understand it is that the signal for the epileptic fits starts on one side and is communicated to the other side. But by splitting the brain, you eliminate that path from one side to the other and therefore get rid of the epileptic fits. The part I found fascinating in the split brain experiments, according to talks with Michael Egnor is that the peoples don't change their personalities very much. And it seems like they don't change their consciousness. That to me is astonishing. That really seems to contribute to this idea of unity of consciousness in a very strong way.

Angus Menuge:

It does because early on when those experiments were first done or treatments for patients, it was thought that, oh look, we can split consciousness, and now there will be two consciousnesses, one for each hemisphere. But Tim Bayne, who is an expert on the unity of consciousness says no, really the best explanation of what is going on is that there is one consciousness that can split its attention and it's doing two different kinds of processing depending on the hemisphere involved. And so it might be that one hemisphere doesn't have everything it needs for certain kinds of cognitive tasks, but it's really one consciousness that's splitting its attention two different ways. It's not two different consciousnesses, according to him.

Robert J. Marks:

We hear about, at least in the movies and this is about all I understand about it, of split personalities. People who turned into a Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde. Sally Field starred in a - I forget what the name of the movie is - but it was about a girl that had numerous split personalities. And would we say here, that this is an exchange of consciousness, is this just something in psychology as opposed to philosophy? Or what's going on here?

Angus Menuge:

Well, it seems to me the best explanation of what's going on is that there is a change in the access to certain information. There's really one subject, but just as in a split-brain cases, it can switch its attention, so in these different modes, what you find is that one personality finds memories and experiences of another personality inaccessible much like the Jekyll and Hyde account that you gave. But there isn't really a reason to think that there are multiple subjectivities or conscious subjects. It's just that this one subject can enter different modes and the kind of information and experiences they have in one mode then is not necessarily accessible in another mode.

Robert J. Marks:

That's interesting. So the single dose of consciousness is always applicable, but it's like a little switch is thrown to switch you from a Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde and you don't relate to the other one while you're doing the switch. I remember the name of the Sally Field movie, it was Sybil. It was in 1976. And she goes through because of abuse as a child, all of these split personality traits. So that is really interesting stuff. What is the idea of too many thinkers? That's also a field in philosophy, too many thinkers. What's going on here?

Angus Menuge:

Too many thinkers problem is one that arises for what are called complex views of personal identity. The simple view of personal identity is that your soul or your mind is always you. That's a kind of a dualist

view. The complex view is no, it's based on some kind of continuity, either continuity of brain states, physical continuity or continuity of memories, mental states. And in the scenarios that are described, they create problems for this view. Here's a few examples. Suppose that there is an ontological three-dimensional copier. It can duplicate people physically. So then you and your doppelganger, which is just like you in every way physically, you kind of share a common origin. This copy was made from you and there's continuity. Since the continuity is there, it would seem that there's now two of you. The problem is there can't be two of you, because two things cannot be one thing.

Angus Menuge:

There's another problem raised by Richard Swinburne. He imagines that he's going to have an operation where each of his cerebral hemispheres is placed in another person. So you've got to think that there are two other people. One of them has a missing left hemisphere. The other one has a missing right hemisphere. Your left hemisphere goes into the first one, your right into the other one. Well, they are continuous with the original you. And so it would seem that if you based identity on continuity, they both have to be you. But they can't both be you because two things cannot be one thing. The options really are either that you don't survive at all or you survive as one of them rather than the other one, but you can't survive as both. And this has been developed even further when we consider what's necessary for consciousness according to materialism. It must be that it is having the right kind of neurological complexity.

Angus Menuge:

Well, the problem is that we see that someone can continue to be conscious, even though their brain is being changed by an operation or something has been added to it. And yet they're the same consciousness. Secondly, that over time, your brain from the point of view of physics looks mostly like a cloud of particles. And yet you remain the same person. Or here's the difficulty, there are many candidates for the brain that could generate consciousness at one time. So in other words, your whole brain, or many, many subsets of it would all be sufficient according to materialism to generate consciousness. So then why aren't you many consciousnesses at one time? Likewise, all the time, if your brain is this constantly changing cloud of atoms with bits of matter being added and removed all the time, why don't you keep changing from one consciousness to another?

Angus Menuge:

In other words, why do we even stay the same person over time at all? And it would be a total fluke to say that all these different clouds of atoms would always produce the same consciousness. Whereas if you take the simple view, well it's because there's something constant. You have this one soul at and over time, and that explains why you are one consciousness at and over time. The physicalism seems to implausibly predict that you should be many consciousnesses at one time and many over time. And this is just not what we observe.

Robert J. Marks:

I looked up some information - because one time I heard that the entire mass of your body changes every seven years or something like that. And looking deeper into it that isn't the case. I guess there's cells that change quite a lot, and then there's cells that don't change a lot. And one of them, for example, is the neurons. That you keep the same neurons. One that I was really dismayed to hear about was fat cells, that they last forever. And they have kind of an immortality associated with it. But it did not address what you alluded to, which was the idea that they are probably replaced maybe one atom

or something, a certain interval of time. And the fact that you remained still the same person is frankly astonishing.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. Because if a hundred percent of your neurons are sufficient to generate consciousness. And so are 99.9% and 99.8%. When you look at all of those subsets, why doesn't each one of them generate a different consciousness? And the same thing as, yeah, over time, lots of parts are being changed in various ways. Why don't they keep generating different consciousnesses? Instead of what we see is there's continuity. And we notice from our own experience, because when you're listening, for example, to a phrase in a symphony that you're listening to, you have the sense ah, yeah, here is that theme coming around again. That presupposes that you are the same person who heard that theme the first time. There are experiences that we have, likewise, when you do a demonstration in mathematics and logic, you're reliant on the fact that you're arguing from premises that you previously understood. And you know where you are in the proof based on lines that you have already proved and know what you're moving on to. All of those kinds of thinking presuppose that you're the same person from beginning to the end of the proof.

Angus Menuge:

Otherwise, you wouldn't really be the one drawing the conclusion. It would be like one person was studying the problem and another person, the conclusion occurred to them, but they didn't reason from the premises to the conclusion. Same with our actions. I mean, what's the point of doing all that work in pre-med or pre-law if it's somebody else who goes to law school or med school? Because given the debts, you might want to do that, right? But nonetheless, that's not actually how we think. We are planning our own future based on our current actions, assuming all the while that it is going to be us that does these things. If we can't account for that kind of identity over time properly, we actually undercut the rationality of human action. Why is the scientist bothering to do these experiments to confirm or refute his theory? If it's not going to be him or her who ends up discovering the results.

Robert J. Marks:

Let me end our discussion together by asking you an outlier question. Elon Musk is developing something called Neuralink. It's a chip, which goes into the brain. And it seems to me that it's immediate application is going to be to those that are handicapped. It is going to be able to allow them to communicate directly to objects that they can't control normally because of their handicap. Do you see something like Neuralink or augmentation of the human brain ever changing our consciousness and what we consider it to be conscious?

Angus Menuge:

Well, it's going to depend on what we mean by consciousness, because it could change our access consciousness. What it can do is it can repair deficits in the flow of information, so that now a person is able to say or do something because there was a problem in sending that information to their organs and they were not able to do it. And likewise with hearing, there are going to be chips that will actually repair some of the neurological damage and that may restore hearing to people. But it's not that the basic ability to be aware of something has been changed, that phenomenal consciousness, either you have it, or you don't. It's just that what you're able to access and do with that consciousness will be improved by improving the flow of information to and from your consciousness.

Robert J. Marks:

But it won't change the consciousness per se?

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, not what it is in itself, just its contents. In other words, you'll be able to be conscious of some new things. I mean, this is not surprising, really. When you think about it, if you put on infrared goggles, you can see things in the dark that you couldn't see before. That didn't give you some consciousness that you didn't have in the sense that you went from not being aware to being aware. It's rather that now you are aware of different things. So you've got access to information which you didn't have before.

Robert J. Marks:

That's interesting. When I do mathematics, for example, I can only add or multiply two numbers at a time. That's the reason if I multiplied like 619 by 413, I have to write it down because that paper is my short term memory on what I'm doing. I can only do one multiplication and then a carry at a time. And it doesn't seem to me that Neuralink is going to improve that. I think that people think that we are going to be super people with super abilities to think and create. But I cannot comprehend that improving what I do, which is kind of one thing at a time with, of course, a short memory. You mentioned about doing a proof. You have to have that short-term memory about where you're going and what you're trying to accomplish, but I don't see that as helping very much. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Angus Menuge:

Yeah. I mean, the instruments will obviously speed up the time before we get to a result. But really what we're doing is we're delegating something to a machine just like when we use a calculator or a computer. It doesn't in and of itself make us any more conscious. So we will be aware of the answer more quickly, but we won't be aware of thinking to the answer more quickly because in fact this device is going to be doing that transformation for us.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that's interesting. I think probably with the Neuralink, I could say what's 438 times 528 and just refer it to a search engine. And they'll give me the answer without me going through all of these steps at a time. So I can see acceleration in that sort of sense. Great. We have been talking to Dr. Angus Menuge about some fascinating things on the unity of consciousness and the idea of too many thinkers, some philosophy that I think has some great applications in artificial intelligence. And we thank Dr. Menuge for the time that he spent with us. Dr. Menuge is a professor and chair of philosophy at Concordia University. And we're going to have a lot of information in the podcast notes about links to his books and some of the other things that are going on in his world. And we will continue this next time on Mind Matters News. Until then, 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.