**Minds Matter Bonus Episode: Questions for a Literary Theorist on Consciousness Research with Dr. Mette Høeg**

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0:00:11.2 Beth Fisher: Welcome back to Minds Matter, a podcast sponsored by the Monash Center for Consciousness and Contemplative Studies. I'm Beth.

0:00:18.5 Ava Ma De Sousa: And I'm Ava. And on Minds Matter, we explore research on neuroscience and psychology while talking through our own personal experiences.

0:00:26.0 Beth Fisher: So this week on the podcast, we spoke to Dr. Mette Leonard Høeg, and she is a post-doctoral researcher at the Oxford Uehiro Center of Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford. And Ava and I both spoke to Mette and her research is super interesting, it's about consciousness, research and how we can apply that to the field of literature. So we speak about different theories of consciousness, we speak about what possible future societies could look like depending on theories of consciousness we could find. Yeah, so we hope you guys enjoy it.

[music]

0:01:09.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: I am a post-doc researcher at the University of Oxford, host at Research Fellow at the Uehiro Center for Practical Ethics and right now I'm doing a visiting. Short visiting research day at the Monash Center for Consciousness and Contemplative Studies, which is where we are sitting in Melbourne. My background is in literature, did my thesis on uncertainty of meaning and uncertainty of interpretation in modernist literature and literary theory. And I also did some film studies and fiction studies more generally further back and some philosophy as well. I also work as a literary critic also with broader cultural criticism for various media. And then with my current project, I'm trying to take literature with me into the field of consciousness research and consciousness ethics.

0:01:55.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: So I'm at the intersection of neuroscience and literature and philosophy really, yeah and there's sort of two main levels that I mentioned to my current project now. One is the broader aim or ambition, which is to... The hope to establish consciousness research as this broad interdisciplinary field and integrate into it disciplines from the humanities to strengthen the ethical and existential dimensions of this field. And then within this broad field that I'm trying to establish in which I see as like a many years into the future project, I'm trying to also look at literature specifically and the potential value of incorporating or using literature and literary study to think about ethics and existentialism in consciousness research.

0:02:45.9 Beth Fisher: Cool. So interesting. And I feel like before I met you, I didn't even know this was an area. [laughter] So I guess from what I've understood since you've been here, the idea behind the work is, so we're finding out all these theories of consciousness while working out different ones and of course that has an impact on how people feel. Because if we're told of things like, "Oh, you have no free will, oh, you have no self," these kind of things, how does that make us feel? And how do we react to that? And from what I understand, you are looking at how we can use literature so when people find out that information they don't... They can feel safe, is that right?

0:03:27.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: That's part of it at least, yeah, part of it. I mean, there are several ways of using literature in this and those are one of them. Because some of... So I mean, there are all these new theories of consciousness and there isn't really any consensus about how we explain consciousness in its relation to matter yet. But lots of the theories that appear are challenging some of the very conventional ways human beings have seen themselves and just generally sort of inscribed in this material scientific aim and scientific explanation of human beings just gaining authority more and more.

0:04:01.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: And that can be... That explanation of human beings and existence in these materialist scientific terms can be quite disturbing for people. And then I find it really interesting to see or to realise that neuroscience in a sense, is in a sense a newcomer to the study of consciousness and also these non-essential conceptions of self and like the potential lack of free will and things like that. Because in literature there are lots of these notions of non-essential forms of self or existence and ideas of human beings and existence that cohere with these new neuro-scientific theories. But where these notions that undermine our belief in sense itself and agency and free will when presented in neuro-scientific context, can seem quite alienating.

0:04:46.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: And just like disenchanting, when you see them represented in literature, for instance, in some of the modernist literature I've been looking at, you really see how these ideas also entail like a emancipatory potential and can be viewed or framed in a really exciting, actually positively mystifying way that can give meaning to life so that which gives one a sense indicates that adopting these some essential notions of self and subscribing or accepting the new scientific theories of self and human beings doesn't need to entail this cold, harsh presentation of human beings and empty existence of all meaning, but that it can be combined with like a humanist project and yeah in a sense of meaningfulness.

0:05:33.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: Do you explain what you mean by non-essential forms or those theories of self and some examples of that that are in the literature and maybe also parallels that exist in neuroscience that you're kind of alluding to?

0:05:46.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. So I'm trying to look at non-essential forms of notions of self in various fields, both in literary studies, literature and contemplative studies and theories, and then neuroscience and looking at the overlaps there. And I...

0:06:02.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: Don't at all have an exhaustive or full overview of that yet. But I'm interested, for instance, in the presentation of or the conception of self that's entailed in the predictive processing theory where the self is explained as a process and not as an essential thing or a center to property and then the overlap or the alignment of that with the no self doctrine in Buddhism, a theory or the view there that there is no sense of self, which aligns with that as well and the reductionist account of self in a philosophy, for instance, as presented by Derek Parfit, which also, he's quite yeah, a lot with the neuro-scientific explanations and then I've been looking, what I've been looking at most recently in literature is the ideas of self in existence in Robert Musil, The Man Without Qualities, his novel, modernist novel, and Virginia Woolf's, The Waves who also have these non-essential conceptions. Non-essential, yes. That there is no centred, no nucleus or centred and stable self, but that we are more perceptual in some way. Yeah.

0:07:14.5 Beth Fisher: So you just mentioned that you use The Waves of Virginia Woolf novel. Could you give an example of how she explains that and do you think that when she wrote that novel that's what she was trying to capture that idea?

0:07:28.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. Well, so she has this in The Waves. It's this novel that's made up by soliloquy by six main characters and it's... She incorporated, she's one of the authors from the modernist period who worked very sort of deliberately with the scientific theories from her contemporaneity and integrated these scientific theories in her work, partly because they aligned with the idea she already had herself about identity and being human and in this work, she does this thing with these soliloquies and monologues of the characters sort of blended into each other.

0:08:03.2 Dr. Mette Høeg: There's repetition of the same tropes and the use of metaphors and the way they speak and they're even, so you see them as they sort of go to school together when they're young and then when they grow older, they're sort of separated by geographical distance and different places in their life doing different things, but they're still somehow psychologically connected and in terms of identity as well and she does that stylistically blends or dissolves a distinction between the characters by sort of integrating the way they speak in the same kind of discourse and she also further dissolves the distinction between the identities by making the characters reflect on this explicitly. So they experience themselves as sort of going veering or isolating between being separated selves in social situations and then feeling as though those distinctions are dissolved from another.

0:08:58.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: So they sort of become one with others and the people around them and also distinction between them and nature so that they merge with nature and become this, yeah. Become one with the waves around them, the fields and the barn. And yeah, there's lots of beautiful metaphorical, very lyrical descriptions of these forms of ego dissolution really in literature. Yeah.

0:09:20.3 Ava Ma De Sousa: Are there any theories of consciousness, I guess, in neuroscience at the moment that would support she was writing about?

0:09:27.2 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:09:27.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: Is there evidence to support like she was expressing?

0:09:31.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Well, I think definitely with the predictive processing theory, the notion of self that's entailed in that, that could quite easily be compared with, or yeah, with that sense of there being no... Of human beings being these processes that take place and the sense of having a sense of self is something that arises in a social situation as, and because you're a human being that needs to survive and in social context and so the sense of being delimited or demarcated is evolutionary useful, but it's also an elusion, which you can then in certain circumstances, right? There's also some alignments with panpsychism, which is not as central and not as accepted a theory of consciousness as predictive processing. But this idea of consciousness as being the fundamental thing in the universe and being ubiquitous, which sort of just entails yeah, blurring of the boundaries between certain human beings and other sentient beings and also human beings and the natural surroundings more broadly speaking.

0:10:37.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. I think maybe it would be useful for our listeners to have little kind of explanation of panpsychism and even predictive processing. We've talked about that before, but I don't think we have listeners besides our parents who are [laughter] that loyal. If we could talk about those two frameworks and also how they would map on to what those kind of metaphors that you were explaining that are present in the Virginia Woolf stuff.

0:11:03.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. [laughter], no pressure.

0:11:04.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: But just a disclaimer, full disclosure that I'm not a neuroscientist [laughter], my background is very much in the humanities and literature, so I might get things wrong [laughter] as I try to explain it and yeah and some of these theories are quite, for me, quite complicated. And for.

0:11:22.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: This is Beth stuff, so Beth can help. Beth should be able to jump in.

[laughter]

0:11:26.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, that's good. Yeah, that's good. That's, yeah. This is where interdisciplinary, see Yeah, it makes sense. Yeah, exactly.

0:11:34.3 Beth Fisher: Start with panpsychism 'cause I actually don't really understand, I've never really been able to understand that.

0:11:40.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: But I think the panpsychism one, I think there's like lots of various, panpsychism isn't just one thing, like lots of these theories, there's the various ideas of panpsychism and one of the prejudices against it and one of the reasons that it's not, that it's being considered marginal is because it's easily sort of reduced to this thing, "Oh, everything is consciousness." This table is conscious. Which is not the case, but it's, as far as I understand it, at least the ones that have sort of appealed, the version of it that has have appealed to me is that it's trying to, is in a way something that has developed in response to trying to handle the hard problem of explaining how consciousness arises from matter, right? And the connection between the brain and consciousness and trying to shift things around rather than explaining consciousness as an emerging property from matter than saying matter might be emerging in some sense from consciousness and consciousness might be the fundamental material of everything of the world and ubiquitous even on sort of an atomic level.

0:12:42.6 Beth Fisher: So then in the waves, the passages where they're kind of... Yeah. They kind of dissolve into nature is that kind of showing that idea because the consciousness is connected to both things and there's no one unique self.

0:13:00.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:13:00.6 Beth Fisher: Is that how that's expressed?

0:13:00.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, exactly. Because it sort of reflects this idea in panpsychism in that, that can be seen as coherent with this idea in panpsychism in that consciousness isn't something that's delimited to it in an individual. Right. We might experience it as such. It might seem as though it comes in these sort of limited packages. But that's just an... That's actually an illusion. And rather it's something much more fundamental that's like the building blocks of everything. And that's something if in Virginia Woolf's novel, you can see that as explained narratively and poetically and you can almost identify with it and experience it as a reason. Okay. How is it then to view the world and be in the world's human being that identifies with this thing of consciousness being much more ubiquitous, a fundamental, rather seeing it as something that distinguishes human being.

0:13:46.0 Beth Fisher: That makes sense. And then, so with predictive processing, the idea is that we have these models and we get evidence out in the world and we update the models that we have through this prediction era. And I, in predictive processing, I feel like there's different theories of how the self plays out within that. What, what's our model of the self, how does that look like? And we've had Kelsey on the podcast before talking about that. And yeah. The minute it gets to the stuff about the self I kind of check out. But 'cause I hate the idea of thinking I don't have a really strong sense of self.

0:14:22.3 Dr. Mette Høeg: Oh really?

0:14:22.8 Beth Fisher: So no self really panics me.

0:14:24.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: Oh, really?

0:14:24.5 Beth Fisher: I hate it.

0:14:24.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: So it's so interesting with how people respond to it. Yeah. Because for me it's like my reaction is just like, it's a relief. Oh great.

0:14:30.4 Beth Fisher: Really? Ava, what do you feel?

0:14:31.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. It feels like a liberation.

0:14:32.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: I feel like I'm probably in between you. I think, I don't know. I've always thought of it almost as like with the ways that I've seen other people talk about these things, I somehow feel like it's kind of tied to upbringing and like religion specifically. And I don't know if that's necessarily the case and Beth, I don't think you grew up religious, but I just feel like I was raised to not believe in anything. And sense of self also just feels like one other, one of those things. But I also feel kind of as what Mette was saying in terms of it being something that we need to have. It's almost like those arguments about like we could be living in the matrix, we could not be living in the Matrix, but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter like whether or not my sense of self is an illusion or not, it's such a strong illusion and it's illusion that I need to keep holding that I don't really care about like the underlying mechanics of it in a sense. So I don't know, it could not... It could be an illusion, but it doesn't bother me, I guess.

0:15:30.8 Beth Fisher: Yeah. Yeah.

0:15:35.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: Very nihilistic.

0:15:37.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah for me it also results in the same because I believe that determinism is true and it's sort of the same split or sort of same [0:15:42.3] \_\_\_\_ where you on one level I know that I don't have a self and I know that I don't have free will, but on another level, just to function in a room and be, you know, have a conversation, have this conversation and go and get groceries and stuff, you sort of need to be, have those illusions there in order to, yeah, survive.

0:16:00.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: Do you feel like those things play into each other for you? That the determinism, which again for people who might not know, is just the idea that like everything is, you can't really change anything. So no free will and that lack of sense of self, are those complimentary views for you?

0:16:15.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. Yeah. I think they're very much connected, right? Because the idea of having free will that's connected to this, the idea of having a centered, sensitive some nucleus of agency, right? You can only have agency if there's someone that has that agency, if there's someone that has the control and does that. And so for me, if you don't believe there's a sense of self, I can't really see how you can believe there's free will as well.

0:16:40.3 Ava Ma De Sousa: I can see Beth freaking out Beth's face is just...

0:16:44.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Oh no.

[overlapping conversation]

0:16:49.5 Ava Ma De Sousa: Dissociating.

0:16:53.5 Beth Fisher: 'Cause I was actually speaking to someone from the lab about your work and like a fear of no sense of self and I'm like oh maybe Mette has some books I should read. [laughter] And they talk about it in this this way. I just... So you can go around and and feel that. And feel okay.

0:17:05.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. For me it's like when I first saw it formulated explicitly in theoretical terms it was a relief or not a relief, it was just... It was a... I was excited to encounter because it's always been my intuition. I've always felt determined. Really yeah. And I never had that sense of self either.

0:17:20.5 Beth Fisher: And is that also what kind of got you into this research?

0:17:24.6 Dr. Mette Høeg: I think so. I think definitely because I recognised it and it was also connected to some strong psychedelic experiences and starting to meditate at a certain point. I remember when I meditated when I was younger, I did a few times, but it never really sort of appealed to me because when I looked inside I saw nothing, which at the time scared me. And then after having some strong psychedelic experiences and getting into the literature about yeah, you know, there actually not being a sense of self, it was like, oh wait a minute, maybe it's not scary. It's just the way it is. There's nothing wrong with me. No one has a self... Some people just think that they do. Yeah.

0:18:00.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: So that's really interesting because we've, talked on the podcast before about people having these negative reactions to meditation where specifically, and like I had that experience too where I was using an app that was... It wasn't Headspace, so it wasn't as like commercial I guess, but it would tell me to look for the self and would explicitly say like, you'll see that there's nothing there. And that was disturbing. And there's like some evidence that suggests that when you are in a western world and you are just trying to meditate to like be more present or be more focused and for these goals that are very Western centric and often like relatively capitalistic, that there's that clash where when you realise, oh, there's no self really, they kind of have this ego dissolution that's extremely detrimental to the rest of your life. Whereas if you were like this monk then this is part of the process and this is a positive thing that you are realising so that kind of context I think is really important and it sounds your psychedelic experience allowed you to have that shift to realise this is okay.

0:19:04.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:19:06.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, and I think it's, that's, I mean, that you just got sort of reaching a really important point, which is that people have different intuitions right, and different reactions. And the way I see, consciousness studies, if it's to be an actual sort of ethically and existential responsible field, it needs to take both of those into consideration, right? And both investigate, what's the emancipatory liberating potential? What potential is there for human enhancement here? Enhancement of well-being and of morality and increased empathy, and what risks are there of actually sort of psychological disruption and social cultural disruption as well.

0:19:45.0 Beth Fisher: Yeah. If there is this whole no self thing, there could be a whole group of people, including someone like me who have this reaction to it, and it loses a lot of, like, I would really panic. It would lose a lot of meaning for me. I would be really worried about how I like the people that I love. That always comes down to.

0:20:00.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:20:00.9 Beth Fisher: Like, it's so important that the people that I love, I feel like I love that.

0:20:04.6 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:20:04.9 Beth Fisher: Essence and that thing about them.

0:20:06.6 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:20:06.9 Beth Fisher: And those relationships.

0:20:07.2 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:20:07.5 Beth Fisher: And I think if I truly accepted, oh, we don't have any self, I just don't think I could, yeah, deal with that.

0:20:14.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: You could thrive or whether you could...

0:20:14.3 Beth Fisher: Yeah. Yeah. No, yeah.

0:20:16.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: And that's exactly where I think that literature could play an important role partly, just for offering consolation as you read it, consolation also inspiration, it will allow you to see the potential aspects of it. And also as a source for kind of conceptual engineering. So in, I mean either formulating an existentialism that would be fitting or sort of viable in this new neuro centric and so that you could sort of gather or yeah. Select concepts and ideas from literature that could be used for, yeah, developing existentialism that could give human beings a sense of, yeah, a sense of meaning and yeah.

0:20:57.9 Beth Fisher: Do you reconcile the idea of increasing morality, increasing well-being by having people exposed to these potentially sort of, or have people view these theories of consciousness as more emancipatory, but also believing that the world is deterministic. Do you think about that ever? Like that your work is trying to make a change in the world, but at the same time everything is predetermined.

0:21:25.3 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, everything is predetermined. But that doesn't mean that, I mean that exactly comes from the idea that I believe in cause and effect, right? So I don't know what's gonna happen, but I believe in cause and effect. I don't, I'm not fatalist, right? It's not that I think that there's some master plan, and no matter what we do, we're gonna end the same place. We're gonna gonna end up somewhere because of causes and the effects they have. So I'm just sort of watching that unfold. But I'm sort of hoping for that the effects that I, that the actions that I have will have positive effects. I don't know. And I know that's predetermined. If I had full insight into, the [0:22:01.9] \_\_\_\_ and thing, full insight into how cause and effect worked on every little subatomic level, you could foresee that. But that's, I do believe in cause and effect. So any kind of action has effect. And I'm hoping that.

[laughter]

0:22:17.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: That they will be that the effects of what I'm doing, for example, will lead to increased well-being. But I don't know.

0:22:26.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: So do you see yourself as more of like a conduit of cause and effect? Because, do you still think that we don't necessarily have agency?

0:22:37.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. I don't think we have agency, yeah.

0:22:39.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: Okay but.

0:22:39.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: We think, we're just sort of inscribed in these chains of cause and effect.

0:22:45.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Okay.

0:22:45.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Really. So we are both a result of them, but we're also like part of them, right? So we are both a result of prior causes and we are the effects of that. And we are also in our self causes.

[laughter]

0:22:55.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: No, I think it's really interesting the way that these types of philosophies can kind of be reconciled. Because I think if I just ask is like an easy question of like, well, how can you simultaneously believe those two things at once? But I think clearly there are ways to be deterministic without being fatalistic, as you're saying. But I think that's really interesting.

0:23:13.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah, yeah.

0:23:15.9 Beth Fisher: So I guess another is kind of going off what we've already speaking about, but, so you have this intuition about what consciousness is and all this stuff. And then you look at it in the literature because these themes are... Yeah, we find them again and again in literature, and not just in science. I think that that gives evidence that it speaks to, like, I don't, I mean, universal truth is a very strong word, but do you think if we find these things again and again in works.

0:23:42.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:23:43.3 Beth Fisher: And, not just literature, I guess works of art that is, yeah. Highlighting something. 'Cause as the way literature and art can speak to human suffering and love and all these other things that we have, and we say, okay, well these are truths about humanity. Do you think that it can also do that in terms of consciousness? Do you think it's uncovering something like we see these repeated things. Yeah.

0:24:07.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. I think at least it shows that some of these intuitions are, have been there for a long time. Right. Both the, so we have, there's this, I mean, that's part of my project as well, this assumption that, oh, the conventional way of seeing yourself is having this censored self and having agency and the new neuro theories will, and consciousness theories will disrupt that and that will create chaos. But there are also the other intuitions, and I have that other intuition just naturally, right? And you see that in literature as well, that back to modernism and probably before that as well, there is the intuition that will, the self is not centered and stable. And no, we are not distinct from our surroundings. We're actually much more closely related to them than we think, and human beings might not have their moral status, which is also one of the things that are being challenged in the context of these new theories, right? So while I think the, like the most traditional, most of normal way of thinking about oneself is in terms of this having this centered self and...

0:25:09.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: Agency, but the other intuitions have been there as well for a long time, it's not just something that neuroscience is coming up with now. But then it's really interesting for me, of course, that there are some of the new neuroscience have then sort of report those intuitions.

0:25:23.8 Beth Fisher: It was funny, I was speaking to Kevin after you spoke to Kevin about this, and we were talking about it. And he was saying, religion also plays in this way of making this idea of no sense of self safe, because in most religions it can... It does come back to this same idea, and people in different traditions reach enlightenment or heaven in these different ways. But at the core of it, it is kind of this no-self idea, and he was saying one of the tools of religion is to make people feel safe with that knowledge. Yeah.

0:25:57.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, yeah. And I think that's connected to this thing of transcendental experiences, which is age old, and which we have in all cultures and which is something psychedelic substances in various cultures also aid or help release. But I think that's one of the things that often lead people to that sense of no self. And that can be within a religious framework or a Buddhist or a modernist or neuro-scientific, but those states of transcendence or feeling experience of transcendence are so fundamental. They're perennial. Yeah.

0:26:33.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: I'm wondering kind of in relation to Beth's question about the truth, because you come from a humanities background, you've also had these very intense first-hand experiences, it sounds like with consciousness. I mean in a sense, we all do, but maybe we don't all have that kind of psychedelic or deep meditation experience. And now you're coming in to potentially more contact with neuroscience and that kind of different form of knowledge. So I'm wondering what you think of as truth in the space of consciousness. And you mentioned that now neuroscience is kind of supporting things that... Insights that have been expressed in literature, but do you see neuroscience as fundamentally adding something? Do you see neuroscience or science in general and the scientific method as imperative to understanding these things? Or is it also more of like what Beth was saying, when we encounter these, phenomenologically, when we encounter these types of theories, and we have these reactions to them, no matter if they're true, whatever that means or not, we still might have strong emotional reactions to that, and also you're trying to look at how to deal with that. There was a lot of questions in one, but I guess I'm just wondering what you think of these different types of ways of acquiring knowledge or having knowledge.

0:27:44.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. And finding meaning and truth. Well, I think all of them are important, and that's why ideally, I would like consciousness research to be this interdisciplinary field that integrates these various and recognises these various, not forms of truth. There's actual kinds, I mean truth and interpretations of existence and life. And I think all of it is important, so this, I quite like this. I think the science is really important because it just has consequences for... And if we wanna progress, and I think generally insights needs to be in compatible and in alignment with science. And I also think it's fascinating, that part of truth and covering that. And there you are in science, then you have in consciousness studies, one of the central problems would be the hard problem, as we spoke about before. Explaining how this thing that seems sort of insubstantial, or yeah, as consciousness arise from physical matter. And then in philosophy and also, I guess more projects we speak in humanities shouldn't what Flanagan has termed the really hard problem, which is, well, how do we... If we explain things materially, how do we then make the hardest problem isn't to figure out how does consciousness arise, it's figuring out how do we make meaning, how do we find meaning as human beings in a materialist world and in a sense neuro-scientific explain reality.

0:29:14.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: And I think those two questions are, I would say both of them are really important and really hard. And once you focus on both of them, and the truth, I mean the final truth, which we will never get at, but only have approximate, I think it should be approximated, also searched for by coming from these various routes, right? We were speaking about that after my presentation the other day as well. This pluralist approach to science and knowledge and truth and meaning really, rather than saying that one type of science or knowledge has like the main authority than a combination of pluralism, pluralist approach.

0:29:51.9 Beth Fisher: Is that what you would ultimately want to get to? I guess you mentioned the theory of consciousness that is more interdisciplinary. Is that your main goal or is part of it... And how important is the part that's more helping people cope and do those feed into each other at all?

0:30:08.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, I think that... Yeah, they do definitely. They're sort of, I think those are... So I was explaining these two dimensions or aspects in my project, one of it, establishing conscious research [0:30:16.6] \_\_\_\_ and then another of looking at literature specifically because that's where I have my expertise. But underlying that is part of this idea or interest in reconciling humanist approaches and culturalist approaches with the scientific ones and neuro-scientific one specifically. And then another one is underlying sort of interest and ambition is to develop this existentialism and that would be sustainable and adequate for this increasingly scientifically explain the world we live in and possibly post-human future.

0:30:57.3 Beth Fisher: So the existentialism is the part that is kind of developing a way for people to cope?

0:31:03.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Exactly, and developing a framework that would enable people to accept these new explanations that might seem disturbing and living with them in a meaningful way, and partly living with them and accepting the uncertainty and potential disenchantment that may entail, but also living with them in a way that could perhaps enable people to sort of realise and use the positive or beneficial potential of them as well. One of the things I'm looking at here is Robert Musil the man without quality. He has this, so he has like a very yeah. Non-essential idea of self. He's also the, he was using contemplative theories, integrating that in his work, which is very literary philosophical work. And so the main character there although he's the one who's referred to by the title The Man Without Qualities.

0:32:00.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: So this idea that he's, Musil is through his main character, Ulrich, exploring this idea that the ideal form of subjectivity, of personal identity is one without fixed qualities. And instead of having like qualities or fixed like personality traits, you try to adopt these more abstract characteristics of flexibility, mobility, and there're also more poetic terms of like weightlessness and it's a way of being in the world. And that was written in the beginning and middle of the 20th century. But I find that those are really relevant and could be quite interesting to work with in the, for today's... For our contemporary needs, it could be really interesting to work with. And yeah. And as part of this project of developing an adequate existentialism for today.

0:32:47.8 Beth Fisher: Yeah. I think it's really important because one of the things that can happen when people have these no self experiences is they can end up not in a good way. And I think that all of this, all the consciousness research at the moment that looks at psychedelics and all that stuff, it's all really positive. But I get worried actually. I get very worried that people aren't looking at, okay, what of the people who've had this experience and haven't been able to cope with that. And I think you're the first person I've really spoken to who's like, we can do something to help with that. And yeah. I feel like many people don't really like to talk about that...

0:33:25.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:33:25.9 Beth Fisher: That side. And like, people can have a negative experience or and develop things like psychosis and these kind of things.

0:33:32.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:33:32.8 Beth Fisher: And it's kinda like, oh, we're just not gonna talk about that.

0:33:34.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:33:35.0 Beth Fisher: Because it cures everything and if we all just meditate and take psychedelics.

0:33:38.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:33:38.8 Beth Fisher: It'll be fine.

0:33:39.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:33:40.1 Beth Fisher: And it's like, well, no, that's not true. And a lot of people it can be quite dangerous for.

0:33:44.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:33:45.1 Beth Fisher: And I get upset about that. 'Cause I think we really need to protect...

0:33:49.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, to recognise...

0:33:49.6 Beth Fisher: Those people.

0:33:50.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: And yeah. And we need not to make it a taboo as well. Right. I mean, that's the thing. Yeah. And I think it is quite interesting and funny too to observe that reaction, right. Because there is such an epic excitement about it and for good reasons, right?

0:34:01.8 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:34:01.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: I mean, there's, some of these studies are really, really promising, but there also things that contradict them and lots of it still needs to be replicated. Right. And I think because, I mean, there was this whole dark age of psychedelic research. And people are tend to be very protective of it now, so they, like, they don't wanna hear about the dark stuff because they're really worried that we are gonna be ending up and still opening up again this field and they're really worried that it's gonna be closed down. But obviously we need to be able to speak about...

0:34:29.2 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:34:29.3 Dr. Mette Høeg: All of the, yeah, implications.

0:34:30.7 Beth Fisher: Because if you don't do that, and then so if we make this claim, oh, well, if we all just come to this conclusion, we have no self and that's the truth and that's the best thing you can do. If you are someone who thinks they should do that and then doesn't have that experience, then what do you feel like that you are not...

0:34:47.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:34:47.5 Beth Fisher: Like you can't handle, like, I don't like that would just feel so alienating and awful. And that's, when I think about all that stuff, that's what I get worried about.

0:34:56.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. And that's where I think, I mean, it's really important that other disciplines and disciplines from the humanities in particular, are involved as well. Right. Anthropology and cultural studies and narrative studies and so on. Also because it's really important and that's something that sometimes get lost, right? When a neuroscientist speaks about there being no self and someone from the humanity speak about it. I mean there's so many different ways of defining the self, right. It can, I mean it's so many, it's not like we are not, I mean we are here as persons, right?

0:35:25.1 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:35:25.3 Dr. Mette Høeg: There is some, there is distinctions and there are notions of self that can be preserved and maybe the idea of a narrative self and so on can be...

0:35:33.6 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:35:35.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: Combined with some of the other no self ideas and equally solution [0:35:38.6] \_\_\_\_ ideas.

0:35:40.5 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:35:40.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:35:41.4 Beth Fisher: No, I love the idea of how can we make this research kind of safe and make people feel okay with it. I think that that's really important.

0:35:49.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: I'm wondering with this research, because as Beth is saying, having this kind of dissolved sense of self currently for us is like pretty problematic, right? People genuinely feel all the time without the kind of compartmentalising that Mette, you and I kind of feel like have that we're like, yeah, there's not really a sense of self, but okay with that and I can continue on in the world as if there was, because as you also mentioned, it's so evolutionarily important to be able to trust that someone else has a sense of self and you have to act like you have a sense of self too, to be able to have like society, we're very dependent on each other to function. But do you think that there is a potential society or world in which you could function without having that stable sense of self and by fully kind of dissolving that illusion?

0:36:37.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, I don't know. I mean I kind of hope there will be, because that's exciting. Like John Danaher, he argues, for the, like, I mean all the tries to shed light on some of all the positive aspects of the post-human or trans-human, future and society entering into the hive mind society and just giving up individuality. Totally. For the moment, I feel as though, what I'm seeing for instance, Robert Musil and Virginia Woolf, this idea that you veer between the two notions, right? You realise, you recognise that the illusion or the idea or the narrative of having a distinct self and individuality is necessary. But you also deliberately try to explore non-essential modes of being and existence and then you can veer back and forth, right? So I mean you can, and that could be implemented in all sorts of ways in an individual through psychedelic experience, meditation, just being in nature and so on, and reading the theory as well, and then trying to sort of find that balance or sort of harmonics of going back and forth between those two modes rather than being like, well no, you have to identify fully with not being your self and with all the consequences for not being able to function in society or no, you have to buy into the whole lie.

0:37:56.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: So yeah, find finding a mode where you're be back and forth or yeah, vacillate between those two modes. But I also find the other idea exciting and I'm certainly sort of I'm just remaining curious and agnostic as to what will actually be the best thing for us in the future.

0:38:13.6 Beth Fisher: And then what are the benefits of a society that can recognise that there's no self? What good things would come of of of living like that?

0:38:22.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. So I think there's also disagreement around that, right?

0:38:24.6 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:38:25.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: One of the things is that it could result in... I mean, that sense of not realising that you don't have a centered self and it's not a self and not seeing you as distinct could result in being less sort of self-protective and less sort of precious about yourself which could result in increased empathy and increased consideration for other humans and other beings, sentient beings as such. The recognition or realisation that we don't have any free will that would also... That would come the... One of the implication that it wouldn't make sense to either blame anyone or praise anyone as well. So this thing of punishing people would become... Punishment would become sort of... That would be rendered obsolete which could also I think have some major benefits and result in increased well-being.

0:39:15.6 Dr. Mette Høeg: And I think a lot of these things that causes us suffering in existence is this thing that we have this... Yeah, we have this room. We clinging onto the sense of self, we're protective of it and we're precious about it and jealousy and and all these negative emotions and hatred and things like that. I think they are quite connected to that sense of having that, the limit itself and centred itself. So if that could be loosened or dissolved I think lots of good things could come from it. And then there are... Of course also it could also be destabilising, right?

0:39:42.2 Beth Fisher: Right. Yeah.

0:39:44.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:39:45.2 Beth Fisher: And yeah. So are there also what would be the negative consequences of having...

0:39:49.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah, lots of people worry that with determinism for instance and the insight that we have no free will that it would just like sort of be a reason for people to not care anymore and not try and just sort of lean back and be like, "Well, I'm not gonna make an effort because it's all determined anyway." I've yet to see to have anyone react to it that way. You still just have your own constitution and because you are determined, have your genes you just continue to act. And since I've had that realisation it certainly didn't have any demoting effect on me. I still just I'm determined by genes and so on. I still just do what I do even though that I now have that sort of meta view on myself. But also people do worry that it would actually lead to an increase in crime as well. Because if I can't be held responsible if there's no punishment then why would I try to be virtuous?

0:40:35.9 Beth Fisher: That's what I was wondering. Yeah.

0:40:38.2 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. Which I think is a valid consideration. Yeah. Worry.

0:40:41.0 Beth Fisher: Yeah. Because then are we assuming that everyone is at heart good? Is that... 'Cause I feel like we're assuming we don't have a self but what we do have there has to be good then, right?

0:40:56.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. I wouldn't say that... It just is, it's neither good or bad, right?

0:41:00.6 Beth Fisher: Right.

0:41:00.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: But you would hope then and again come back to cause and effect that people realising these things would mainly have a beneficial impact. But then again that depends on personality and things like that. So it's very difficult to say. Which is why we need to be aware of both. Yeah. Of both intuitions and both the risks and dangers and the possible benefits.

0:41:25.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: My mind is so like twisted right now, I feel like.

0:41:30.6 Beth Fisher: I know. It feels like, " What? I didn't expect it to go this way."

[laughter]

0:41:33.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: Really? I expected it to go this way for sure. [laughter] We were talking to a humanities person, of course they're gonna twist us up. That's really interesting.

[laughter]

0:41:47.9 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. That's my secret plan of getting the humanities master plan of getting humanities into invading the natural sciences.

0:41:56.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: And I think it's just that we're so used to... Especially for me, I don't know if you connect with this Beth. I feel like philosophy and humanities in general there's so much more work that goes into it in a sense in terms of like deep thought. And I feel like a lot of the times as a psychologist there's some periods where I am thinking relatively deeply about what I'm doing but most of the time it's curry menial tasks or like interacting with participants like things that almost it feels sometimes like almost anyone off the street could do.

0:42:22.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: And so I feel like a lot of the times I'm not engaging really deeply especially not with these like potential imagined futures like thinking about the hive mind or thinking about what it could be to have a society in which might not even need any of this. Like the narrative self where it's just like experiential self and moment to moment living or even like extended mind and thinking of all of us as like kind of brain, AI futures. And so it's just hard as a psychologist to project myself there and think about also like thinking about it in terms of implications of what that means for now and what we should do now. And I think it's just amazing that you have that type of ability to project yourself and that you're working on such huge ideas now. So yeah.

0:43:08.2 Dr. Mette Høeg: But then the other thing I like, I like what you have and what scientists have. And that's why I want the interdisciplinary. Because I want the thoughts of humanists or people from humanities and philosophers to... Those thought experiments and ethical concerns should of course be sort of reality check. And you can only do that if you think in collaboration with scientists who can actually say, "Okay. So no, that's never gonna be possible." Or, "No, that's like any irrelevant scenario." Otherwise you're gonna waste a lot of energy on irrelevant scenario thinking and letting your imagination run wild. So if you want those deep thoughts to be actually relevant and beneficial then they need to I think happen in correspondence with science.

0:43:56.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: Do you have plans for real kind of applied things that you could do? Education programs? Is that something that you have in mind or do you wanna work more on that theory part and let other people figure it out?

0:44:11.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: I still have... It depends on where it goes from here. So right now I'm doing like a two and a half year post doc, which runs out in a year from now. And so I'm gonna be applying for various grants to start like first like a little sort of little center for this thing. And then working on establishing like a broader international network for this interdisciplinary consciousness research. I'm organising a conference in Oxford in April 12th and 3rd April, which brings together lots of researchers from different fields to think about these things collectively. So I'm trying to establish that field, but how it's gonna... How it's concretely gonna look in the future. I don't quite know. It depends on who will be willing to support me as well. But ideally it's very broad. And then of course I would be in charge mostly of, or not in charge, but [chuckle] be invested in the literary aspect most in that. But where I would be coming from accessing that broader field from, but then having lots of other people engaged and involved and working on various different projects and doing proper experiments as well and yeah. Yeah.

0:45:18.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. It's really cool. 'Cause I know you are focused on consciousness, the consciousness research, but I feel like this could be applied to other fields as well or other areas of research, like I do mental health research. And so much of how we can understand people's experiences through literature. How we can communicate things like a lot of the findings and everything are quite difficult or different treatments and things people can have is a lot. And I think the idea of using other fields to make that knowledge more understood. And also as scientists, understanding more of people's experience through literature, all of that stuff. I think is a really cool thing to think about.

0:45:56.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. I think, yeah, that's a really good point. And that's like another aspect that I'm also trying to be quite explicit about in my project, this whole area of new neuro technologies and the new increased possibilities of influencing and also manipulating human mind states and some pretty important questions, problems arise from those new possibilities. Like, for instance, what is a good state of consciousness? Is there such a thing as a good state of consciousness? What's a bad one? And that's something that literature has been thinking about and exploring for ages since it first arose. So that's another place where I feel that this sort of almost like vast field of literary consciousness theory, which literature in a sense is can be of use to explore those issues.

0:46:44.0 Ava Ma De Sousa: As Beth was saying, like it feels like a lot of our interdisciplinary and interdisciplinarity, how big of a buzzword that was. And it obviously is important because it feels like in a lot of our fields, as Beth was saying, like in mental health, in science, we don't talk enough to people who are studying mental health in other ways. Like people who are writing about characters who have various mental health issues and things like that. But to me, like when I think, think of a consciousness, because I'm not in the field, it feels like it's one of the most interdisciplinary fields that we have right now because there's AI researchers, there's philosophers, it just seems to be bridging so much. So I'm wondering like where do you see consciousness now in terms of research and do you feel like it's actually just an illusion from the outside that there is a lot of crosstalk? It sounds like it is. So I'm just curious of like what the state of it is from the inside.

0:47:36.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: No. No. I think there is... Mostly the disciplinarity has been in terms of philosophy engaging with it as well. And that's what I'm interested in is integrating discipline. Discipline is beyond philosophy as well, but also preserving of course philosophy's engagement because that's really important. But I think it's actually with conscious research it is, because it is just so fundamental. And it's something that's important to all fields. It's quite, even though there might be that much cross-disciplinarity in conversation going on at the moment, there's still engagement with consciousness, there's so many fields. And when I then try to activate it now, the response is really positive. People are just like, they just did an invitation, like yes, sure. So it seems a place where it's actually quite easy to do actual interdisciplinarity and not just... Yeah. Where it doesn't just remain a buzzword, but what is actually quite easy to facilitate and make it happen for real, which is nice.

0:48:32.1 Beth Fisher: Yeah that's cool.

0:48:32.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:48:33.0 Ava Ma De Sousa: Okay. So you're not struggling to integrate these things, like there's the will to do that?

0:48:38.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: No.

0:48:38.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: Okay. That's good.

0:48:40.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. Yeah. So far there's definitely the will and people very much, at least the ones I've been in contact with, yeah. Agree that this, yeah, this is interdisciplinary. Yeah.

0:48:48.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: Well, it sounds like you're gonna get your theory of everything soon.

[laughter]

0:48:51.6 Dr. Mette Høeg: Any day now.

0:48:56.5 Beth Fisher: I guess to end, so if people have listened to this and they're really interested in all these kind of ideas we've spoken about and wanna learn more, where should they go? 'Cause I feel like this... Should they start reading certain books or what would you suggest people? 'Cause I think a lot of people are gonna listen to this and be like, "Oh my God, what?"

[laughter]

0:49:14.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Oh, that's difficult. Because there's so many different sources. Right. And depends on which aspect you're interested in as well. If anyone wants an introduction to my project, there's the paper that I also shared with you, which is gonna be out in the Journal of Consciousness Studies, I think it's called The value of literature for the field of Consciousness Studies?

0:49:36.9 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:49:37.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. And I have more things in the pipeline, so there should be more out of that. And if people can make it to the conference in Oxford [chuckle] then that's definitely, that's gonna be a pretty central event for that, I think. And apart from that, then it's a very vast field, right?

0:49:56.3 Dr. Mette Høeg: I mean, and there's contemplative studies and there's all the theory of consciousness and the different various theories in literature. There's... I'm looking at modernist literature at the moment, but there's also, which very much has... It deals with the more sort of optimistic towards these ideas of non-essential self. But there's also post modernism, which to a much larger degree is focused on the more problematic aspects of it, like the fragmented self and things like that. And in contemporary literature, there's lots of like literature that's more explicitly engaged with new neuro-scientific theories then there's a whole field of science fiction [chuckle] which is...

0:50:31.7 Beth Fisher: Yeah, yeah, totally.

0:50:34.5 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. So it depends on really on which specific concepts you find. You sort of find interesting. Yeah, in the fields.

0:50:42.0 Beth Fisher: I just read recently Klara and the Sun, have you read that?

0:50:44.8 Dr. Mette Høeg: Oh yes. Yeah, yeah.

0:50:45.5 Beth Fisher: Have you Klara and the Sun, Ava?

0:50:47.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah.

0:50:48.1 Beth Fisher: And I feel like that felt really real. That felt like that could be us.

0:50:53.0 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah.

0:50:53.3 Beth Fisher: He's one of my favorite authors. I've read everything he's ever written, but I thought that, I really felt, oh, this... I can see myself here dealing with, I don't know, there was something...

[overlapping conversation]

0:51:03.1 Dr. Mette Høeg: No, yeah. And it's such a good example of literature illustrating in a way that's just beyond the capacity of scientific and philosophical genres illustrating like the possible implications psychologically, emotionally, social-culturally of some of these new technologies. AI specifically right here. Yeah.

0:51:21.2 Beth Fisher: I've found that a lot. Yeah.

0:51:22.7 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. Yeah. That's a really good example.

0:51:25.0 Ava Ma De Sousa: Have you read Machines Like Me?

0:51:26.2 Beth Fisher: No.

0:51:27.8 Ava Ma De Sousa: I think it's Ian McEwan I wanna say. It's kind of similar, but it's also an AI thing. And I actually liked it better than Klara and the Sun. Yeah.

0:51:41.7 Beth Fisher: Really?

0:51:42.4 Dr. Mette Høeg: Yeah. And some of these things are relevant for this as well.

0:51:42.8 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. You should read about it. I don't think you're gonna like it more than Klara and the Sun [laughter], but I recommend it.

0:51:50.6 Dr. Mette Høeg: And then I definitely recommend Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities also just because it's my favorite literary works, but I... It's amazing. And the extent to which it corresponds to contemplative, theories, studies and neuroscience. And then still being totally anti-religious and secular. It's really nice. Virginia Woolf's The Waves as well, much shorter and really inspirational as well.

[music]

0:52:25.8 Ava Ma De Sousa: Our intro and outro music is Nobody Stayed For the DJ by Glassio. Our transition music is Back For More also by Glassio. Minds Matter is mixed, edited and created by Beth Fisher, she's the Australian one and me, Ava Ma de Sousa. We'll be back in two weeks with a brand new episode of Minds Matter. In the meantime, find all our episodes and show notes on mindsmatterpodcast.com.

[music]