

## Bruce Gordon On Idealism and the Nature of Reality (Part I)

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Austin Egbert:

Is our physical world merely an idea? Our guest host, Dr. Michael Egnor, discusses idealism and the philosophy of reality today on Mind Matters News.

Announcer:

Welcome to Mind Matters News, where artificial and natural intelligence meet head on.

Michael Egnor:

At its most fundamental level, is reality more like a mind? Or is it more like a physical object? That question and questions like that are fundamental to our understanding of nature and our understanding of ourselves, and our understanding of God.

Michael Egnor:

I have the unique privilege to interview today, on Mind Matters News, Dr. Bruce Gordon. Dr. Gordon is Associate Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at Houston Baptist University. And he's a senior fellow at the Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute. Dr. Gordon is a dear friend and a brilliant man, and I hope to learn a great deal about what is at the fundamental root of nature.

Michael Egnor:

So Dr. Gordon, welcome. And thank you for joining us.

Bruce Gordon:

Thank you. After that introduction, I kind of feel like I should crawl down a hole and just leave things where they are, because that was over the top. Thank you, Michael. And you have my utmost respect as well. For you are, if anything, far more accomplished than I am.

Michael Egnor:

I've learned a lot. I should point out to our listeners that Dr. Gordon and I both attended a conference on philosophy of mind and on neuroscience about a year ago. And he opened my eyes to idealism, and to what I think is a much deeper insight into the nature of reality.

Michael Egnor:

So perhaps we should start, Dr. Gordon. What is idealism?

Bruce Gordon:

There are a lot of different varieties of idealism, and rather than go through a laundry list of its variations, let me just start with the kind of idealism that I would be an advocate of, which is an Ontic Theistic idealism. And what do I mean by that? Well, it's essentially a form of idealism that is probably most closely identified with the Anglican Bishop, George Berkeley. So how would you define it? Basically, it's the idea that material substances, as substantial entities, do not exist and are not the cause of our perceptions. They do not mediate our experience of the world. Rather, what constitutes what we

would call the physical realm are ideas that exist solely in the mind of God, who, as an unlimited and uncreated immaterial being is the ultimate cause of the sensations and ideas that we, as finite spiritual beings, experience inter-subjectively and subjectively as the material universe.

Bruce Gordon:

So we are, in effect, living our lives in the mind of God. And he is a mediator of our experience and of our inner subjectivity, rather than some sort of neutral material realm that serves as a third thing between us and the mind of God, so to speak.

Michael Egnor:

How does idealism, thus understood, relate to Plato's theory of forms?

Bruce Gordon:

Well, you'd have to take a neo-Platonic or Augustinian spin on it. Plato thought that there was this realm of abstracts particulars that was eternal and unchanging, a realm of forms, participation in which gives identity to the objects of our experience and enables their recognition by our minds. And you had a whole theory of, basically, that involved pre-incarnate existence that feeds into that, and a doctrine of reminiscence that we remember these forms, and that's how we recognize the objects.

Bruce Gordon:

But rather than that, I would prefer to look at it in a kind of an Augustinian vein, so that the Platonic forms are not mind-independent abstract particulars, the way that Plato thought. But rather ideas in the mind of God that differentiate and give identity and order to the objects of our experience. So things are the kinds that they are because they fit the form of that thing in the mind of God. And that idea is communicated to us, then. So there's a confluence, then, of that kind of Augustinian neo-Platonist idealism with Berkeleyan immaterialist idealism.

Michael Egnor:

There are, I believe, other kinds of idealism. For example, idealism by German philosophers. And how does that differ from Berkeleyan idealism?

Bruce Gordon:

Well, I would say... I mean, it depends on who you're talking about. But let's take Kant as kind of the wellspring of all of this. So Kant advocated a kind of epistemic, as opposed to ontic, idealism. So Kantian idealism is entirely compatible with the existence of Nernst material substances, even though they are inaccessible as things in themselves. So for Kantian idealism, you've got a self that kind of provides a transcendental unity of consciousness. It precedes and grounds all of our experience. And our perception of reality, then, is governed by the innate structure of the human mind. It has space and time as a priori modes of cognition and various categories of the understanding. You know, quantity and quality in relation to modality, stuff like that, that give order to our experience.

Bruce Gordon:

But it's structured that, the mind itself, by its innate structuring, gives to our experience. So we never experience reality in itself, which he called the noumenal world, but only reality as it appears to us, a phenomenological reality or phenomenal reality that is ordered by the innate structures of the human

mind. So Kantian idealism and its descendants are, in many ways, an epistemic form of idealism, whereas the Berkeleyan form of idealism is ontic. It's a denial that there is material substance, and an embedding of reality in the mind of God, such that it is finite spiritual beings experiencing the reality brought into existence by this unlimited, uncreated, immaterial being.

Michael Egnor:

I've long been bothered by one aspect of Kant's metaphysics, or one consequence of his metaphysics, in that his assertion is that we can never know reality in itself. But isn't that claim itself considered exempt from Kant's view that we can't know reality in itself? That is, if we can't know reality in itself, then how does he know that we can't-?

Bruce Gordon:

How does he know that reality is unknowable?

Michael Egnor:

Right. Right. It seems necessary to exclude his metaphysics from the reality that we can't know.

Bruce Gordon:

Well, he would have to maintain that he can know and examine from the inside, from the subjective structure of his own experience, I suppose, the innate structure of the human mind, which interposes itself between the thing in itself and our apprehension of it. So if he himself is as inscrutable as the noumenal realm, then I suppose that the objection would apply. But there may be some wiggle room for Kant, and I'm not sure, to say that he has direct access to the contents and structure of his own consciousness, and can describe that. But having described that, assuming that he's right about its structure, then he has this veil between himself and the noumenal realm, the realm of the things in themselves. He only has that phenomenal realm that is filtered through the structure of his own consciousness.

Michael Egnor:

Yes. But one of the things that has always bothered me about skeptical metaphysical perspectives, like Kant's, and of course there are many others that are much more radical, is that to be really consistent, you have to hold your own viewpoint as the exception to your skepticism. And it seems to me cheating. So if Kant is right, then Kant has no way to know that he's right.

Bruce Gordon:

Sure. If the self is as inscrutable as the noumenal realm that the self supposedly filters, then that's absolutely correct.

Michael Egnor:

A number of philosophers in the early modern time, and some today, have proposed panpsychism and cosmopsychism. What are they, and how do they relate to idealism?

Bruce Gordon:

Okay. Well, incidentally cosmopsychism would be a type of panpsychism. But panpsychism is basically the view that consciousness is fundamental to nature and permeates nature. It's present in everything,

but to varying degrees. Okay? And usually you encounter it as one form or other of what might be called constituted panpsychism.

Bruce Gordon:

So what is that? It's the idea that the consciousness that we would intuitively associate with human beings and other animals isn't fundamental, but it's grounded in something that is more fundamental, that permeates nature itself and is a property of nature itself. And there are two versions of this. There's a bottom up version, which is usually called something like micro-psychism, and a top down version, which is the cosmopsychism, or cosmo-psychist version that you refer to in your question.

Bruce Gordon:

So micro-psychism, or micropsychists, think that old facts about human consciousness are grounded in consciousness-involving facts at the level of microphysics, so that the macro phenomenal truths of our experience are grounded in micro phenomenal truths. So kind of like we would think of atoms as combining to give rise to physical objects, we have instead psychic atoms of one form or another that combine to yield more complex forms of consciousness. And of course, that gives rise to a seemingly intractable kind of combination problem. Right? How do you get a coherent macroscopic experience out of fundamental physical... Well, how do the experiences of fundamental entities, say if there's subatomic particles or whatever, combine to yield human conscious experience?

Bruce Gordon:

Now coming at it from the other direction, from the top down, you've got something like cosmopsychism. And it would say that all facts about consciousness in general, and about human consciousness in particular, are grounded in facts about consciousness that concern the universe as a whole. So the universe itself is conscious, and somehow our individual consciousnesses within the universe are manifestations or particularizations of this universal consciousness that's gotten separated off and seems to be unto itself, but is not. It's really a manifestation of the universe's consciousness as a whole. Okay. So that's cosmopsychism.

Michael Egnor:

To just sort of backtrack a little bit, because I think it's actually an utterly fascinating question, is when we make the assertion that the fundamental reality of the universe is mental rather than physical-

Bruce Gordon:

Right.

Michael Egnor:

... what is mental? That is, we have a sense of what physical things are. They have extension in space. They're heavy. They have inertia, things like that. But what is a mental thing? And can we define mental things except by what they're not?

Bruce Gordon:

Well, of course a panpsychist would deny this, but I would say the distinction between mental things and physical things is that for mental things, there is something that it's like to be that thing. Whereas for physical things, there's nothing that it's like to be that thing.

Michael Egnor:

Right.

Bruce Gordon:

From the inside, so to speak.

Michael Egnor:

Right.

Bruce Gordon:

Of course, the panpsychist says that there's something to be like everything. Right? Right down to the most fundamental constituents of reality that we would, from a different philosophical perspective, regard as entirely impersonal.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Right. So in a sense, mental things have first person experience rather than third person. Franz Brentano, a philosopher in the 19th century, felt that the hallmark of mental things was that they're intentional. That is, that they are directed towards things. Whereas things that are physical aren't sort of about anything. They don't have any point to them. Is that definition, number one, do you think that's a reasonable way of defining mental things? And is there an application of that idea to idealism?

Bruce Gordon:

Well, certainly intentionality is a hallmark of the mental. It's a hallmark of what it means to be conscious, that mental states are states that are about something and directed toward that which they are about. In idealism, particularly an ontic theistic idealism, or theistic ontic idealism, all of reality is, of course, about something, and is given purpose and meaning in the mind of God. And when we are, as human beings, in sympathy with that and in accordance with that, we are understanding reality in that context that has been imbued with divine meaning. And we understand it from that perspective. So yes, I think intentionality is integrally bound up in idealism. There's something that's reality, that reality is about. There is a purpose that is given to reality by the divine mind, and that makes reality itself directional and intentional in respect of God's purposes.

Michael Egnor:

And it has been proposed, and I have a lot of sympathy for this proposition, that the intentionality that's characteristic of mental states is found by analogy in teleology, in nature, in the sense that teleology is nature's intentionality. Which I think fits beautifully in the idealistic way of understanding the natural world, because a mind points to goals, it points to purposes and meanings. And we find that nature is just suffused with purposes and meanings. Do you think that's a useful perspective?

Bruce Gordon:

I absolutely think that's a useful perspective. In fact, I think it's pretty much the way things are. That the teleology that we observe in nature, the directedness that we observe in nature, the sort of things that, if you like, and I suspect that you do, constituted the insights that were part of Thomas's fifth way. The argument from design, the idea that nature is directed toward a goal, and the noumenological, or law-like, structure of nature that constrains the behavior of things, which has no internal explanation, must

either be taken as, which seems very strange and is deeply problematic from the standpoint of the principle of sufficient reason, to take it as a brute fact. Rather, this is something that has been imposed as a structure on reality by the divine mind. It's discernible. It's mathematically describable. We discover it as we analyze our experience. All of this points to the teleological structure of nature, which is a manifestation of divine intentionality.

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Bruce Gordon:

So intentionality, in the form of teleology, absolutely pervades the structure of the universe.

Michael Egnor:

It's almost as if our minds were created in the image of the creator of the universe.

Bruce Gordon:

It's almost like that, Mike. Isn't it? Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, that's right. So thank you, Bruce. It's been a pleasure and a privilege speaking with you, and we plan on doing more of these discussions. So, thank you very much. And thank you, all of our listeners. From Mind Matters News, thank you.

Announcer:

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