

## Why Cartesian Dualism?

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Michael Egnor:

Hello, and welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor, and I have the great pleasure today to talk with Joshua Farris. Dr. Farris is a Professor of Theology, and I think it's going to be a wonderful discussion.

Michael Egnor:

The topic today is why Cartesian dualism? In this episode, we'll discuss the merits of a theory of the mind-body relationship, in contrast to alternative viewpoints, such as materialism, hylomorphism, and Berkeleian idealism.

Michael Egnor:

Materialism is a dead end because of the phenomenon of qualia and the hard problem of consciousness there. There's also a quality problem in materialism too, but that's a different issue. Some form of dualism or immaterialism can satisfy these concerns.

Michael Egnor:

Cartesian dualism has become sort of a whipping boy in philosophy, theology, and the sciences, even more so than its cousins in the dualist family. Why is this? Does Cartesianism have any advantages over the alternatives?

Michael Egnor:

Joshua Farris has argued, yes, in fact, it does. There's one feature of persons that seems to require Cartesianism, but Cartesianism is compatible with versions of idealism, and possibly even hylomorphism.

Michael Egnor:

One of the interesting implications of Cartesianism that needs spelling out is its theistic grounding. Some consider this a weakness, but others see this as a welcome and attractive feature of Cartesianism.

Michael Egnor:

My guest is Dr. Joshua Farris. He is a Professor of Theology of Science at Missional University. He is also a freelance writer for several academic news outlets, and on topics of the soul, science and faith, and public theology. He is a consultant, writer, and product developer for Raising Families. He was the executive director at Alpine Christian School and a part-time lecturer at Auburn University at Montgomery. He's also the Director of Trinity School of Theology.

Michael Egnor:

Prior to that, he was the Chester and Margaret Paluch professor at Mundelein Seminary, University of St. Mary of the Lake, and Assistant Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University.

Michael Egnor:

He's authored a number of volumes, and he is co-editor of the Routledge Handbook of Idealism and Immaterialism.

Michael Egnor:

It is a great pleasure and an honor to have Joshua join us today.

Joshua Farris:

Good to be with you. Thank you.

Michael Egnor:

Thank you. Thank you. I'm fascinated by your insights into Cartesian dualism. I'm, of course, very interested in the question of the mind-body relationship.

Michael Egnor:

For our listeners, what is Cartesian dualism, and how can it help us understand the relationship between the mind and the body?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, sure. Good. Yeah, so Cartesianism is kind of a tradition. It is a tradition following from René Descartes. It's a tradition that's developed over time, and there are a few of us around today who defend some sort of Cartesian view.

Joshua Farris:

It's a tradition that's developed, and what that means is, and we can get into this, what that means is, we're not signing onto all the Descartes set, of course, and we're not affirming all the naughty ideas that he had, that have had a sort of denigrating view of the body, or a negative influence on science, and how we practice science, which there's lots of critiques out there, in that respect.

Joshua Farris:

It is within a sort of family of what's called Substance dualism, a Substance dualism view of human constitution. If we're talking specifically about human constitution, or locally, how it is that humans are composed or constituted, Substance dualism is basically the view that there are two kinds of substances or two type of substances.

Joshua Farris:

In other words, property bearers, with some intrinsic sort of unity to each. Oftentimes, when you think of Substance dualism, there's a property bearer of the soul or a mind that has properties of a mental sort. Then, there's properties of a material kind, or a body that is distinct from the mind itself. Cartesianism would be within that sort of broader family of Substance dualism.

Joshua Farris:

On a Cartesian understanding, there's something unique about the mind-body relationship, in contrast to other potential variations of Substance dualism. If you're following somebody like Richard Swinburne or John Foster, who are both Cartesian dualists of sorts, they would say, and I would tend to agree with them, something like this.

Joshua Farris:

"That I am just my soul. I just am my soul. I am my soul that has a body, or has some sort of singular relation, or interactive relationship to my body, but my is not me, strictly speaking. I'm not an animal," as some of their views would say. "I am a soul, and particularly, I am my soul."

Joshua Farris:

This is what's important, really. The soul is the core or the essential part of me. It's the thing that carries along my personal identity. You might contrast this, say, with some sort of Atomist view that you might call some Atomists, and there's all sorts of different views out there.

Joshua Farris:

I don't want to simplify it too much, but some Atomists would say they are Substance dualists, themselves. They would say that, "I am body, but I am a particular kind of body that has a principle, a formal principle, that is the sort of informing work of the matter."

Joshua Farris:

You might take it that when there is this composition of the material with this forming principle, we have a distinction between the material, itself, and the material as informed.

Joshua Farris:

You might think of, for example, think of the marble statue where there's sort of the marble, and it's the sort of the material, and then there's this forming principle. Some would argue, that on that basis, there is a substantial distinction between the two, and so some Atomists would move in that direction.

Joshua Farris:

That's distinct, say, from arguably, from a sort of a more rounded Cartesian view that says that, "I just am my soul." I am not strictly speaking identical to my body, and how you work that relationship out between the soul and the body, well, that becomes a little bit more complicated. Obviously, there's different views on that.

Joshua Farris:

The important point is, is that I just am my soul, and my soul is the core part of me that carries along my own personal identity.

Michael Egnor:

The thing that I think bothers me the most about the Cartesian view. I should first say that I have a great deal of sympathy for it. I actually think that Atomism needs to be understood with respect for that view, for several reasons. It allows the Atomistic perspective, I think, to heal closer to our lived experience.

Michael Egnor:

The first problem I have with the Cartesian view is that whatever value the Cartesian dualism has in understanding the mind-body relationship, I think it is as a general metaphysical view, really deficient. That is, that Cartesianism is bad metaphysics.

Michael Egnor:

I think it's better mind-body metaphysics than it is general metaphysics, but I think the general metaphysics is pretty bad. Animals aren't machines, and the things that exist in the world are a great deal more than just matter extended in space.

Michael Egnor:

How do you feel about the general metaphysical presuppositions of Cartesianism? If they are significantly deficient, does that make the mind-body aspect of Cartesianism less valuable?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Yeah. I think with respect to what I am committed to, as a Cartesian, I am making a fairly minimal claim that, maybe it can be shown that that minimal claim has implications that are negative in the way that is often sort of characterized or projected back onto Descartes and the metaphysics that he inspired.

Joshua Farris:

It seems to me that the sort of claim that I just am my soul is, is the sort of minimalist sort of Cartesian commitment that I'm committed to, that I think is the product. Product of common sense, a sort of common-sense epistemology. It's the product of various arguments that we could get into and talk about, that are not always readily hospitable, maybe, to certainly not hospitable to materialism, but not hospitable, obviously, hospitable to sort of variations of Tomas dualism.

Joshua Farris:

If we think about various views about like a meteorological replacement and the modal argument. The modal argument, which someone might advance, and say something like, "If I'm the very same thing as my body, then whatever is true of me is true of my body, but my body may survive without me, and, therefore, I'm not the very same thing as my body."

Joshua Farris:

There are certain modal intuitions that seem right and seem confirmed, also, by data that's out there like near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences, as well as a sort of a theological tradition that I am committed to, and that is that I will exist someday. I hope to exist. I believe I will exist, disembodied. That Cartesianism is certainly more at home with, or provides maybe a better, or stronger accounting for those sorts of modal claims that seem conceivable.

Joshua Farris:

That minimalist commitment is, I think, what is really the strength of Cartesianism, but in that, I don't think I'm committed to say the idea that the world is merely sort of a meat machine, or that the world lacks a sort of teleology, or that the world, the natural world, that is in the natural organisms, physical

organisms, are sort of just mechanistically explained all the way down, to their sort of component-Atomistic parts.

Joshua Farris:

I don't think a Cartesian, at least as I've defended Cartesianism, I don't think that I am or you have to be committed to those other sort of metaphysical commitments that are often characteristic of Descartes' larger metaphysical program.

Joshua Farris:

I'm less interested, I guess, in defending those and more interested in defending this more core claim, this minimalist claim. I could call it kind of a Neo Cartesianism, that's what I'm more interested in. This idea that I just am my soul. I am not composite of my soul and body or mind and body. I am not a complex. My personal identity is not complicated, in say the way that a materialist, or arguably Atomist, would be.

Michael Egnor:

I certainly agree that that's a strength of, at least Neo Cartesian, way of looking at things, and it's a very real strength. It's something, I think, Atomism is somewhat lacking.

Michael Egnor:

To me, the two great strengths of the Cartesian view, as you pointed out, it gives more grounding to the sense that we all have, that there's an eye there, that there's a single meta-physically simple, unitary thing that is us.

Michael Egnor:

The Atomist view, I think, has a great deal to say for it, but I've always wondered myself, "Where's the eye in all of this." We all have that sense of what Peter Craft calls the heart, like who we are, and it's not just one of the powers of our soul. It's us, and where's us, and the Cartesian view helps with that.

Michael Egnor:

The other aspect of the Cartesian view that I think is particularly strong, is it seems to accord very well with near death-experiences. There's a lot of things in near-death experiences that are much more readily explainable from the Cartesian view of the soul, than it is from the Atomistic or other kinds of views of the soul.

Michael Egnor:

One problem with the Cartesian view, is that it seems to make it difficult to know why, or in what way we would know, a particular soul is associated with a particular body. I mean, let's say that my friend, Joe and I came into work one morning, and Joe said, "Well, I'm Mike now." His soul is here, and I said, "Well, I'm Joe, and we switched last night."

Michael Egnor:

How would you disprove that? I mean, if the body is just the ship that the soul is piloting, well, pilots can switch ships. That gets to the modern problem that we're having with transgenderism. That is that if the Cartesian view is correct, a person is transgender could very readily say, "Well, yeah. I'm a woman's soul

in a man's body." Whereas, the holomorphic view would be, "No, you're not, that your body is very much a part of you, and you have a spiritual or psychological problem, but you can't be a woman's soul in a man's body."

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's an interesting problem. I think, there certainly are those intuitions that I find appealing, those intuitions, that sort of body swapping intuitions is what you're talking about.

Joshua Farris:

I'm reminded of that movie Being John Malkovich. Have you seen that movie?

Michael Egnor:

No. No, but I've heard about it.

Joshua Farris:

Okay. Well, so it's a fascinating film, because there's John Malkovich, there's this 33 and a half floor or something like that. People can actually go up to that partial floor, and there's this little portal, and they can slide down this portal, and they end up somehow accessing some of the items of John Malkovich's perception. They're able to experience, perceptually experience, life through his body.

Joshua Farris:

You have females, actually, who are able to access, and so it raises this sort of similar problem that you're talking about. Certainly, that fits more readily with the sort of Cartesian view than the Atomist view and that's a concern.

Joshua Farris:

I think, obviously, body-swapping intuitions are more readily at home with Cartesianism, and that's why there are these intuitions that we have, when we think about the possibility of existing, or persisting out of the body, or in a sort of near-death experience.

Joshua Farris:

I think that's kind of the trade-off, but I don't know if it's as severe as people have made it out. If we sort of tweak our sort of Cartesianism along the lines of something like an Emergentist view. If we think about, say something like William Hasker's view. Hasker affirms a kind of Emergent dualist view, where he says that, "The mind is a phenomenal unity of consciousness, that it's the sort of binding force or the thing that provides unity to the items in one's phenomenal consciousness."

Joshua Farris:

Kind of like, if we think about the body and the soul relationship, it's similar. He uses the example of the magnet and the magnetic field, in which when the magnet, when there's certain conditions that are met, the magnet gives rise to this magnetic field.

Joshua Farris:

There's certainly a distinction between the two, but there is this close, intimate connection between the field and the magnet, that are not easily separable. I think most Neo Cartesians today, like myself, like Richard Swinburn, John Foster.

Joshua Farris:

No, John Foster takes his view in an Idealist direction, but I think most would affirm something like an Emergentist view, that brings the soul, at least functionally speaking, brings the soul more closely connected with the body, such that we can at least intuitively say, it makes sense that when I hit my head on the top of the door, it's actually affecting in my states of consciousness, or like the last couple of nights, when I've been up really late, or early into the morning, it affects my states of consciousness, the way that I treat my body, and, certainly, that's the case.

Joshua Farris:

If we take it, that there is some sort of Emergentist aspect to how the soul comes to be in the world, I think we can provide some sort of accounting that brings the soul more closely aligned with the body that we've been given that I commonsensically take for granted, when I interact with the world, through my body, and through the various controls of my body.

Joshua Farris:

As somebody like Gilbert Ryle, the picture isn't quite as simplistic, as say a person that's in a ship, who has these various controls in the ship, but this person could actually step outside the ship and jump in another ship.

Joshua Farris:

There's actually a more fine grained, functionally integrated relationship between the body and the soul.

Michael Egnor:

Wouldn't that just be a hylomorphism? If you get to the point where you're really sort of talking about form and matter, which is, obviously, the more fine grain functional relationship, then it would just be a hylomorphic view.

Joshua Farris:

Well, maybe. I mean, I guess I was taking the hylomorphic view, to implicate a more robust ontology of matter form, relationship, and the Emergentist view, certainly most Emergentists, whether they're sort of non-reductive physicalists, or they are dualists like William Hasker, the sort of strongest, or sort of Emergentist view, certainly, they would be reticent to call their view hylomorphic.

Michael Egnor:

Right. I've long had problems wrapping my mind around Emergentism. "It sticks in my craw," is what I say. I don't understand it. I don't understand what emergence is, and I don't see how it is a level of explanation. It seems to me kind of magical.

Michael Egnor:

What is emergence? Of what value is it, in understanding things like this?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Well, the way that Hasker and others define it, Timothy O'Connor is, obviously, one defender of what he calls an Emergent Individualist view, which is just a version of non-reductive physicalism, which says that there are these properties or powers, that at some suitable level of neuro complexity just gives rise, in a law-like fashion to consciousness, and free will, and these sorts of perspectives, or these sorts of powers.

Joshua Farris:

Hasker is building upon that sort of Emergentist set of literature and saying something similar, in that what actually emerges, is actually substantial. What is actually required if we are going to have say, downward causation, or freedom of the will, or a first-person perspective, is a substance of a sort that emerges from a suitably complex neural structure and central nervous system.

Joshua Farris:

He says that what we need is something like thisness, he calls it some sort of phenomenal thisness, and this is where phenomenal consciousness becomes really important for him, and why he ends up affirming a kind of substantial dualism, because he doesn't think that phenomenal consciousness can be made sense of as a non-reductive physicalist, but rather, it requires this additional feature that binds together the items within one's phenomenal consciousness.

Joshua Farris:

The fact that I can go out and experience a green pasture, and I experience all the elements in the green pasture, including the wind blowing the flower out in the middle of the green pasture. I experience it as one unified field, and I can isolate and pick out various items within my field of consciousness, but there is some something about that that is unique and unlike anything that we have in the physical world, that requires what Hasker would say is a thisness.

Joshua Farris:

Emergence may be magical. The kind of emergence that I am committed to is a more sort of minimalist commitment. Emergence is commitment, that could be accounted for by way of simply just theistic contentions. "Why am I connected to this body?" Well, simply, as John Foster would say, "Well, because God set it up that way."

Michael Egnor:

I thought a great deal about emergence. It's I guess everybody has their bug bear, and that's one of my bug bears, because whatever I hear it described, at the end of the description, I really feel as though I don't know any more about what's going on than I did before the description. It doesn't seem to me to explain anything.

Michael Egnor:

What emergence is, from my perspective, is it's a psychological phenomenon. Meaning, the discovery that something is behaving on a large scale that you didn't expect from knowledge of its behavior on a small scale.

Michael Egnor:



Why would H<sub>2</sub>O molecules feel wet, when you put them together to make water? There's nothing about the H<sub>2</sub>O molecule, itself, that would make you think of wet, but when it all goes together, it does feel wet. You say, that's an emergent property of water's molecules, is that wet them you get a lot of them together. That's just a psychological thing. There's nothing magical that's happening when the water molecules get together. It's just that, psychologically, we didn't anticipate that it would feel wet, and, hey, we're surprised it does.

Michael Egnor:

If emergence is really a psychological phenomenon, which again, I think a pretty good case can be made that it is, that it can't be used to explain the mind, because it presupposes the mind. To me, it's just smoke and mirrors. It doesn't really explain anything.

Michael Egnor:

Certainly, the things that emergence tries to explain are fascinating and important things. For example, the unity of conscious experience is very important, but I don't think saying that it's an emergent property explains anything. I don't get the explanatory power.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

One thing that has led me, I don't have the same problem with Cartesian dualism that a lot of, for example, materialists have, like problems with the interaction problem, and so on. I think the interaction problem is sort of overdone. That is, that if one accepts a mechanical understanding of nature, then, yeah, there is an interaction problem.

Michael Egnor:

In the mechanical understanding, a lump of mass has to hit another lump of mass to make something happen. Obviously, that can't be the case with Cartesian dualism, but if one accepts a hylomorphic understanding of causation, which includes formal and final causes, then immaterial things can cause all kinds of that don't involve matter hitting matter.

Michael Egnor:

I don't think the interaction problem is such a big deal, although it's not a big deal, if one does take a somewhat Aristotelian way of looking at nature, but the big catch I have with Cartesian dualism is that it's too close to Cartesian metaphysics. I think Cartesian metaphysics is a catastrophe.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Yeah. Maybe. I mean, you could affirm. The kind of Cartesian commitment that I have, I could easily affirm a sort of Berkeleyan Immaterialist conception of how God sort of sets up the world.

Joshua Farris:

I think, I'm already, as a sort of Theist Cartesian, already committed to some version of idealism, as it stands. I mean, at some level, God is the ultimate God's mind. His intentions are the ultimate causal explanation of the world.

Joshua Farris:

That mind is what, at least in part, explains values and the meaningfulness of natural events, that maybe, themselves, don't have apart from God's intending or conferring. They only have meaning in that sort of theistic context, where God intends them in that way, something like a sort of personal idealism.

Joshua Farris:

The commitment that I have to Cartesianism is fully compatible with that, but it's even compatible with them more robust Berkeleyan conception that says something like bodies or material, really, is a fiction, at least a fiction in an ultimate sense. There is no substantial existence to the material. The material, itself, is most phenomenal quality that God communicates to created minds.

Joshua Farris:

We experience the physical world, as extrinsic or external to our minds, but it is something that God communicates to us that we experience, we have phenomenal experiences of. The view that says that I am strictly speaking identical to my soul or my mind, that is, at the base, what explains my consciousness, and my freedom, freedom of the will, and the fact that I am me, and not someone else. That's the important Cartesian claim that, I think is compatible with the sort of Berkeleyan Idealism.

Joshua Farris:

I haven't gone there yet, but it is compatible with it.

Michael Egnor:

Yes. I do feel that the sense that we are ourselves, is something that is not well account for in the hylomorphic understanding, and that that is a strength of the Cartesian perspective.

Michael Egnor:

Why don't we wrap this session up. Joshua, I'm interviewing Joshua Farris. This is Mike Egnor, and please, stay tuned for our next discussion. Thank you.

Announcer:

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