

The Body and the Soul

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor I have the honor and the pleasure of hosting this segment. This is the second segment of my interview with Dr. Joshua Ferris as a Professor of Theology of science and it's a fascinating discussion about Cartesian Dualism and all sorts of matters that related to it. So Joshua, welcome back and thank you.

Joshua Ferris:

Thank you. Good to be with you.

Michael Egnor:

Joshua and I were just talking briefly about one gap in the hylomorphism thomist way of looking at the human person that has always bothered me and I get the sense that Joshua has the same general perspective and that is that there [inaudible 00:00:46] so clear and I meta physically simple in theistic perspective to The Thomist human being is a composite of body and soul and that's what always bothered me. A Peter Kreeft is a philosopher and theologian of Boston College has described this eye as the heart and there's a great deal of reference to it in the scriptures. And that makes a lot of sense to me but I'm not sure that Thomism has worked out that notion of the heart. Could you Joshua see a Thomist Cartesianism that could the two be blended in a way that did justice to both?

Joshua Ferris:

Possibly. I haven't seen anyone develop anything like this it... and maybe because of the respective baggage with each sort of tradition that's there, nobody's tried to work this out, but I obviously you've mentioned the challenges to sort of broadly Cartesian view or especially to Descartes I think, less of a problem for the Neo-Cartesianisms that are developing the view today. I'm not sure that the commitment sort of the minimalist commitment that I have to... the idea that I am my soul has the same sort of baggage or implications but it seems to me that you could affirm all sorts of views about specific views about the body itself, the nature of the body and be a committed sort of Cartesian in this way.

Joshua Ferris:

And this is the strength in... I think this is the bigger challenge. The bigger challenge would be for materialist or a Thomist [inaudible 00:02:33] to come up with some sort of accounting of personal identity that seems to be outside of the realm, or say an emergentist or a non reductive physicalist to come up with an accounting of personal identity. It just doesn't seem like we have any resources to do so... to sort do that. But it seems to me that we could have a Cartesian intuition we could recognize the unavoidable Cartesian cogito assumption or this basic metaphysical assumption that "I am in my soul, I am not my composite or my animal that is has this unique, formal principle in it. But I am my soul that can lose parts and physical parts and remain me and could even exist in the afterlife or disembodied."

Joshua Ferris:

That seems the harder problem to me to explain on other views but it seems perfectly compatible that you could have a more of a robust, nearest Telian view of the body or you could have a view of the body that is a complex set of phenomenal properties, like something like Berkeley's view or you could affirm something else that there are these higher order teleological principles that are organizing the body that I interact with, that doesn't in any way undermine the Cartesian intuition. But again, I think as a Cartesian one could have a robust functionally integrated relationship with the body that is meaningful and robust and doesn't denigrate the body to mere machinery and as a Cartesian also, I don't think I'm committed to I even Descartes claim that the beasts are mindless or soulless. If they do have some sort of consciousness or first person consciousness in particular, then they would have something like they would have a soul like I do that would have to be created by God. And I think that's okay.

Michael Egnor:

[inaudible 00:04:59] Yeah. What has led me to a Thomist view and I must say that had it not been for neuroscience, which is what led me to a Thomist view, I would probably be a Cartesian because I do agree that there's a great deal. There's a great deal to say for it. Although my sense of Cartesianism is that the closer we get to Berkeley and idealism, the better Cartesianism that it gets it is that I think it's my sense is it's not idealistic enough because it's really the Cartesian understanding that it matter. That bothers me more than the Cartesian understanding of the soul, but I don't know that there's so separable, meaning that part [inaudible 00:05:42] the pun, meaning that if there's a metaphysical glitch in general, Cartesian metaphysics it really impairs the Cartesian understanding of the soul.

Michael Egnor:

If whatever the body mind soul relationship, I think we would all agree that it needs to be fit in as a coherent whole with nature. I'm not a naturalist, but we are obviously a part of nature in a very meaningful way. And so the whole metaphysical view has for me and I think idealism is very nice that way in that I think you can get a consistent coherent metaphysical perspective from a Berkeley metaphysical way of looking at things. And you can do the same with Thomism I don't think you can do it with Cartesian.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. So let me ask you some, a couple questions. So, it seems to me that my reticence to move in the direction of a sort of Berkeley [inaudible 00:06:45] or I guess you might call it Cartesian idealist view that has a Berkelian flare to it because Berkeley doesn't sort of specify in a robust way, from what I recall reading in a robust way, these sort of individual essence or individuality or the particularity issue that just naturally comes out of a Cartesian way of approaching these issues. But it seems to me the reason why I've been reticence and to go in sort of more robust, idealist direction is that if you take... this is getting into your specialty. So this is out of my specialty in neuroscience you have these split brain experiments, right? And you have evidence that suggests that there are split perspectives that in emerge or causally come about as a result of the split brain and you have other neuro-scientific experiments that suggest similar phenomena, which seems to support something like a more robust substantial dualism that is not had... on maybe an idealism.

Joshua Farris:

I mean, that's an open question. I'm sure a Berkeley an idealists have ways of explaining that but it doesn't seem to be intuitive or the product say of common sense. And this is another sort of larger issue with Berkeley an idealist or some sort of similar view is that it just, isn't the product of common sense.

It's not necessarily inconsistent with common sense it, so if there's, unless I have some sort of overwhelming reason to sort of pick up a view, a theory that makes better sense of the scientific data, I'm just inclined to take a more common sense approach and say, "Yeah, we have these two substances neuro-science seems to support that when my... when something happens to my brain it affects me and my conscious states functionally or at least it affects my perspective, which you might there's a distinction there between perspective and consciousness." [inaudible 00:09:05] And that seems to be more naturally at home with something like a Cartesian Dualism rather than a idealist perspective that doesn't give substantial sort of substantiality to the body.

Michael Egnor:

Right? I think the strongest argument from science for idealism, and quite honestly, I think this is decisive or least at our present level of science is an observation that I heard about years ago in college that fascinates me, it still fascinates me. And that is when you look at the quantum mechanical world or the world on the quantum mechanical level matter disappears. That is in its most basic or in its most detailed reality at the quantum world, nature is an idea it's not material, electrons are not little balls of things. Electrons are ideas. They're, ideas expressed by equations, [inaudible 00:10:12] For example, when you look in a reference book and it gives you the mass of an electron, it doesn't say which electron, because if you want to know the mass of a billiard ball, you have to say which one, because they'll be a little different from Baltimore, but there isn't any difference from electron to electron there's one mass and people have even said, do we know that does not more than one electron, could it just one that is popping up everywhere?

Michael Egnor:

So the whole notion of individuation of matter disappears at the quantum level, which is a very idealistic way of looking at the world. So I think quantum mechanics is sort of the scientific expression of idealism, and it's a powerful, argument. So you really can make a case that matter is in the mind because quantum mechanics is all mind. So I think idealism, from that perspective, I think I idealism is true. And I think it is in some ways the best way of looking at nature, but there are aspects particularly of the mind brain relationship that strongly support. You mentioned split brain surgery, which is endlessly fascinating stuff. And it was originally... the original research on it was by Roger Sperry. Who's, neurophysiologist worked in the mid 20th century, won, won the Nobel prize for, for this.

Michael Egnor:

And I've operated on and worked with split brain patients over the years. And Sperry noted this too, that in some ways, the most remarkable thing about them is not the stuff that spar found, what spar found, which were perceptual disconnections were very subtle, very difficult to find. That's why he won the Nobel prize for it was that they weren't obvious. It took a lot of very subtle research to find it, the most remarkable thing about these people is that they're, no different after the surgery than they are before that the hemisphere of their brain are functionally disconnected. And they're the same person. It would be as if you took your chainsaw to your desktop computer, cut it in half and it still worked just fine. It say, there's something awfully odd about this computer. Cause it shouldn't work just fine when he cut it in half, but it does.

Michael Egnor:

And that's an awfully strange thing. And it was so strange that it led to Sperry to reject materialism. He had no use for the materialist view at all, but there is a split things do split in what, but what splits is

only perception, perception, splits, but intellect doesn't split a sense of self doesn't split the will doesn't split. And there's been fascinating follow up on, Sperry's work by two researchers, Justine Surgeon, and Yas Pinto, who have looked at these patients more carefully and they found an observation. That's a tree. There's a brilliant experiment that surgeon did with these patients. And what she did is she took a bunch of split brain people, and she presented letters to their visual fields in such a way that she was presenting different letters to the isolated hemisphere. Like your right hemisphere might see a K and your left hemisphere might see an N and your hands and your arms.

Michael Egnor:

Of course, aren't controlled by the opposite hemisphere. So in a person was split brain. The right hand is controlled by their left hemisphere, which sees their right visual field. So their right hand can only respond to the right visual field. And their left hand can only respond to the left visual field. And there's no connection, at least no obvious connection between the two of them. So what she did was she would show them letters and she'd asked them to, push a button when they, see a letter, ect. And then she'd say, I want you to push a button when one or both of the letters are consonants. I'm sorry, are vowels when one or both of letters are vowels, push a button. So people would see these disconnected letters and these different hemisphere that aren't, that aren't connected. And when they would see a vowel, they'd push it.

Michael Egnor:

But they weren't told which hand to use to push the button. And there was a button at each hand. And as it turned out, when they would see a vowel say in their left, in their left hemisphere, they would just as often push the button with their left hand as they would with their right hand that as they push the buttons, regardless of what hemisphere was driving the hand, it was just 50-50, which meant that somehow the hemisphere that didn't see the vowel knew it was a vowel. And the interesting thing is that these people still had a perceptual disconnection, but they could figure out which one was the vowel. And that was not disconnected. That was unitary. It didn't matter which hand and which hemisphere they knew. So that, so beautifully fits the Aristotelian to view of the rational soul that it takes my breath away.

Michael Egnor:

What it's saying is that the perceptual disconnection is there because the sensitive soul, which is the material powers of the brain is in fact split or the sensitive powers of the soul are split. So perception is split, but intellect and will, which are immaterial powers of the soul cannot be split. And indeed they are not split with split brain surgery. So it's beautiful work it's fascinating. Work it to me it Hughes perfectly to the Aristotelian to mystic model of my brain relationship and Cartesianism, doesn't explain very well. The perception split and idealism doesn't explain it well either but toe nails and nails it. The other thing that I think is absolutely fascinating and this is something that has not been in my view questioned or investigated as it should just by the medical let alone, the you basic is an observation by Wilder Penfield who is the pioneer in seizure surgery back in the 20th century.

Michael Egnor:

And Penfield noted that there are no intellectual seizures. That is that when people have seizures, the seizure is is a kind of a random Stochastic Activation of the brain electrical impulses get going and they can happen anywhere. Do anything, meaning that it can make your arm jerk. It can make you fall down and go unconscious. It can make you see flashes of light. It can make you have emotional experiences. It

can make you have memories and smells and they're all practically anything. It can be a part of a seizure, except people never have intellectual content that as people never think abstractly during a seizure and that's remarkable that is that no one ever does calculus as a part of a seizure or even simple arithmetic, no one ever adds one plus one repeatedly as a seizure no one ever contemplate justice or mercy as a seizure but practically anything else you can think of has been described as the ichthyosis of a seizure and Penfield said, "Why not?"

Michael Egnor:

I mean, if most of the brain is devoted to abstract thought, why wouldn't an occasional seizure, fire off an occasional abstract thought and it never does. And that's exactly what Aristotle would've said. I said, yeah, because abstract thought is not material doesn't come from the brain. The brain conditions our ability to think. Abstractly, if you drink a lot of alcohol and you have EtOH floating around your neurons you're not going to think abstractly as well as if you don't. But the actual cause of the abstract thought is not the brain. It doesn't come from the brain. But then again, there are thoughts that are caused by the brain but they're not abstract there're emotions they're perceptions, they are movements. So this dichotomy between perception and cognition is very real in neuroscience and the only metaphysical framework that also has that dichotomy is the Aristotelian Thomas understanding of the soul. So that's why Thomist

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah. I guess I'm hung up on the Aristotelian framework as being the only way to make sense of or explain that sort of data. I mean, when you read somebody like Richard Swinburne in his 'The Evolution of the Soul.' He gives all sorts of thought experiments about how desires and since perceptions are somehow functionally integrated processes that are dependent upon cognition and neurology and so he recognizes that. So in that way he may be affirming something like an Aristotelian view of the body but is it someone who affirms let's say hypothetically emergentism is a phenomena that is sort of set up by God as a sort of law like relationship where there is this lawful occurrence that just occurs when these complex set of conditions are met, would that not provide any sort of explanatory power similar to the Aristotelian conception?

Michael Egnor:

Sure. I say this humorously, but I actually believe it. First of all I think idealism is best understood as Augustine said, that "Creation is a thought in the mind of God." That is that we and the universe we inhabit our thoughts in God's mind. And that they're quite real because their thoughts in God's mind, that's not to diminish them, but that's what we are and that's an idealistic under understanding of metaphysics. But I would say tongue-in-cheek that God is a Thomist. That is that the structure in the divine mind Hughes rather closely to the Thomist view. So you can say that I'm a Thomist and idealist.

Joshua Farris:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michael Egnor:

To me, that makes the most sense. That's the thing that... But I can't because of neuro-science, as well as some other things in science for example, the collapse of the quantum wave form, the notion that things exist in an array of potential states until they are observed.

Michael Egnor:

And then they collapse into an actual state is straight out of Aristotle who described Potency and Act. I mean, that it's and Heisenberg noted that Heisenberg said, "If you wanted to understand quantum mechanics in 2300 years ago, just Read Aristotle." What seems strange to us is not strange at all from a hypomorphic perspective at the quantum level, the transition from Potency to Act is collapse in the quantum way form. And actually St. Thomas said something that blew me away blew me away and Dianama when he was discussing the active intellect, that is that in the Aristotelian Psychology, the intellect has an active and a passive power and the active power is the power that extracts the intelligible form from something and it basically takes you from a particular thing in your environment to a conceptual understanding of what that thing is all about.

Michael Egnor:

So the active intellect, metaphorically breaches out and grasps the intelligible form out of something and the passive intellect receives that form. It allows you to understand it and what St. Thomas said was that "In order for the active intellect to grasp the form of a substance, it must reduce the substance from Potency to Act." It can't grasp the form until the substance is in Act, because if it's a Potency, it doesn't exist." Which is exactly the mental dependence of quantum collapsed that we see in quantum mechanics that is that the mind has to collapse the wave form in order to grasp it and that's what St. Thomas said 1000 years ago. So it just gave me chills, gave me chills. So the Thomistic-Aristotelian understanding of the mind and frankly of a lot of science is so perfect. It's so elegant that, as I said, I think we are ideas in God's mind, but God's a Thomist.

Michael Egnor:

So, and my problem with the Cartesian view is, well, first giving full respect to the idea that there is an eye that's missing in Thomism that it certainly is missing in materialism, but it's missing in Thomism that the Cartesian view does show respect to which I think is very good. My problem with the Cartesian view is that Cartesian metaphysics is so raw in so many ways that I find... I can't accept the mind body metaphysical aspect of such an inadequate metaphysics in so many other ways, its just greats, for example, what is matter? That is that if one comes from a Cartesian perspective how does one explain? I mean, what is matter?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, well, obviously there's the traditional Descartes sort of line or at least the interpretation of Descartes and there's the Neo-Cartesians who don't always put their full commitment behind that sort of definition.

Michael Egnor:

And the definition would be that which is extended in space. Is that the-

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Its a sort of quantitative measured extension that's what matter is but again, yeah. I mean, a Cartesian of today a contemporary Cartesian isn't committed to that necessarily. I don't think it follows from the commitment that one makes about the soul or personal identity. I am wondering if something like an Aristotelian conception of matter or an idealistic slant of a sort of Aristotelian conception of matter can be compatible with a Cartesian view of the soul. I mean, most Cartesians today are actually affirming. They're not coming with a sort of full blown metaphysical picture that they have parsed out

with respect to a mad or they're not coming at it from with the sort of the freight of the sort of Aristotelian chronological categories but they are gesturing maybe in that direction, which-

Michael Egnor:

...the problem is that in the Aristotelian view of matter of course in kind of a most fundamental way matter is potency, but matter, or in a substance, I think Aristotle would say is the principle of individuation and in Cartesianism at least for a human being the principle of individuation is the soul. So it's completely different so I don't see how you can blend them. I mean, the Aristotelian understanding of matter is that it individuates his understanding of form is that it doesn't individuate. It's the principle of intelligibility. It's not the principle of individuation. So in a sense, the Aristotelian telling view of the human person would have just the opposite metaphysical commitment to that of Descartes that it's the matter of the person individuates the person and the soul is the intelligible part Descartes would say, "Well, the matter is that measurable. So the intelligible part and the soul is what individuates it's kind of the opposite."

Joshua Farris:

Yes. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. So I think if you come at identity from an Aristotelian perspective, if matters, what individuates, then I don't think we're ever going to get at that more fundamental feature. That makes me me.

Michael Egnor:

Right.

Joshua Farris:

And I think that's the harder problem. I think there's probably on logical ways we could set up to make sense of how sort of how matter works and how it sort of affects the mind. How it affects perception we can make sense of that if we have a sort of functionally integrated soul body interaction but I don't think the Aristotelian can ever make sense of the individuality of personhood.

Michael Egnor:

Right, and I think the Aristotelian almost would try to skate over that by saying that the person is the composite. So the individuation of the person is because of his matter, but the person himself is the composite. Therefore he is individuated because he's composite of matter so however I think I do agree that that's kind of skating I don't come away emotionally satisfied with that because there is let's face it there's metaphysically simple me. And I was going to say that I know well but [inaudible 00:28:32] would say, "No I don't know me well at all that me is what knows not what is known." And there is something hit me that knows that is me. It's not in me, it is me and I do agree that the Cartesian view can handle that and I don't think they took us through few handles particularly well. And I still keep going to the idea, well, if we were thoughts in God's mind and God was a Thomist maybe that would handle it well. So-

Joshua Farris:

Maybe yeah.

Michael Egnor:

So it's fascinating. Well, I want to thank you. Thank you, Joshua. Would you like to come back for one more session?

Joshua Farris:

Sure.

Michael Egnor:

I would love to talk about philosophy of science if that, if that appealed to you and how proofs of God's existence and the whole science versus religion question, which I think is fascinating if you'd like to do that next,

Joshua Farris:

Let's do that. Yes.

Michael Egnor:

Thank you. This has been Dr. Michael Egnor. I've had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Joshua Ferris on some fascinating questions about body mind and we'll be back to talk about science and religion [inaudible 00:29:39] Thank you.

Announcer:

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