Don't Blame Me; I'm a Meat Robot.

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor. I have the pleasure and privilege of interviewing Dr. Joshua Farris, who is a Professor of Theology of Science at Missional University. And this is our third segment. Welcome, Joshua, and thank you for joining us.

Joshua Farris:

Thanks. Good to be with you.

Michael Egnor:

I wanted to talk just a little bit about philosophy of science and its relation to theology. First question is, is a belief in God compatible with the practice of science?

Joshua Farris:

Yes, absolutely.

Michael Egnor:

It seems like a silly question, but it's actually a pretty hot question nowadays. Which seems to be kind of crazy, but, okay. So why would anyone claim that you couldn't believe in God and be a good scientist? Why do people believe that there's a conflict between science and religion?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Well, I think there's some converging influences in the history of science that we could look at, and you might know better than me. But there is certainly a prevailing common idea that science proceeds, and has proceeded without God in the picture, in the explanatory picture of natural events that we observe and we try to make sense of. That God really has supplied no relevant answers to you. Certainly when we ... hearkening back to some of our discussions about the nature of consciousness and personal identity. There seems to be a common idea that scientists affirm something like the elimination of say, the free willing-self.

Joshua Farris:

I was reading a couple of weeks ago, this book by a set of popular scientists that are out there called Ideas that We Must Dispel Ourselves of. I think that's the title of the book. Have you heard of that book before?

Michael Egnor:

No, I haven't. But it sounds like the kind of book they would write.

Joshua Farris:

So, yeah. There's so there's this common idea that when we proceed utilizing the method of methodological naturalism, as methodological naturalism is often taken to be just science ... it just is science. And science proceeds in a way that has no need for ghosts, angels, or eerie spirits, or God. We have no need for that. In fact, we have no need for consciousness itself.

Joshua Farris:

So you have people like the psychologist, Bruce Hood, who are operating out of this sort of framework, who make these wild claims. Well, we're forced to reexamine the factors that are truly behind our thoughts and behavior and the way they interact, balance, override, and cancel out. And so he goes on to suggest that we no longer need any idea of this free willing-self. Instead, we need to reexamine what's behind our thoughts and behavior, because science doesn't give us a free willing-self or a conscious self. There is no more need for that.

Michael Egnor:

The odd thing, if you think about it, why would any one try to convince other people that there is no free will? Because if there is no free will, then other people aren't free to choose to agree or disagree. I mean, just the whole process of discourse presupposes the option of choosing. And if everything's guided simply by physical interactions, then we all just reflex preparations anyway, and why bother? That just amazes me.

Joshua Farris:

What's the point of persuading us otherwise, with reasons that we can adjudicate?

Michael Egnor:

Or how can you be persuaded if you don't have free will anyway?

Joshua Farris:

That's right. Why would you try to persuade me of that?

Michael Egnor:

Right. The other thing is that the philosophers and scientists who argue that the notion of God ... and spirits and things like that are superfluous to science, are the same people who propose that an uncountable number of universes exist within the multiverse. And of course, they invoke that to try to defend a naturalistic understanding of the fine tuning of the universe and so on.

Michael Egnor:

So they'll posit the existence of uncountable other universes, that's not too strange. But the idea that there might be a God is crazy, and just off the plate.

Joshua Farris:

Yes. Yeah, it's baffling.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. Yeah.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

Unless one just presumes that they just don't want to face up to God. If you want to get rid of God, that's the way to do it, you just stipulate that he doesn't exist. And then you can't do science without him and then you make up all sorts of crazy stuff and call it science.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. There do seem to be some moral motivations behind the scene. I mean, in that same book, this ecologist ... have you heard of Jerry Coyne ... Is that his name? Jerry Coyne, at the University of Chicago?

Michael Egnor:

Jerry Coyne, yeah. Yep.

Joshua Farris:

Coin, at the University of Chicago.

Michael Egnor:

Right, right.

Joshua Farris:

I mean, he makes claims like this. The same book, This Idea Must Die, he states quote, "The illusion of agency is so powerful that even strong incompatiblists like myself will always act as if we had choices, even though we know we don't. We have no choice in the matter." end quote.

Michael Egnor:

The funny thing is that the exact opposite is true.

Joshua Farris:

Right.

Michael Egnor:

They do have choices and they pretend that they don't. I've interacted with Coyne quite a bit, we go back and forth on blog debates. And he's quite hilarious, meaning he actually, he put up a post on his blog a couple years ago showing, I think it was a dented fender on his car. Somebody in the faculty parking lot had bumped into his car and then drove off. And how, in fact, somebody did that to his car and didn't own up to it.

Michael Egnor:

And I pointed back and said, well, if the guy had no free will, how can you blame him?

Joshua Farris:

Right.

Michael Egnor:

I mean, if it was a meat robot, there's no blame, there's no accountability. No more than that than if the wind knocks over a tree branch, it just happened.

Joshua Farris:

That's right. Yeah. Why would you be so upset about it?

Michael Egnor:

Right, right, right, right. There's no such thing as culpability. I mean, it just ... stuff happens. The other problem with that viewpoint and the denial of free will is an extraordinarily dangerous idea. I actually think it's among the most dangerous ideas put forth by a materialist who put forth a lot of dangerous ideas. And the reason is that the denial of free will is the core of totalitarianism. That is that totalitarianism entails reducing human beings to livestock, and then to hurting them and culling them as you see fit. Hitler didn't gas six million Jews because they were individually culpable of doing anything. There were no trials, they weren't convicted of any crimes. They were basically treated just like livestock that you wanted to get rid of.

Michael Egnor:

And if there is no free will, it's true that there is no guilt, but there's also no innocence. That is that if there's no free will, then the purpose of law enforcement, the purpose of the criminal justice system would then be just to stop crime. And if you want to stop crime, you can do it very efficiently by just imprisoning people who might commit crimes. Why wait to prove their guilt? It's much more efficient.

Joshua Farris:

There was a film about that, right?

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. Yeah, sure.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, what was that film?

Michael Egnor:

Pre-crimes and ... right, right. It was Tom Cruise.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, Tom Cruise ... Minority Report.

Michael Egnor:

Exactly.

Joshua Farris:

Yes. Yeah, that's it.

Michael Egnor:

And if there is no free will then everything leads to that. Why waste your time waiting until somebody commits a crime? I mean, if no one is guilty, then no one is innocent.

Joshua Farris:

Why not put them away or put them out of misery early on, right?

Michael Egnor:

Precisely.

Joshua Farris:

So that we don't have to deal with it, yes. Yes, right.

Michael Egnor:

Nobody puts a coyote raiding their chicken coop on trial, they just shoot it. Because coyotes don't have free will, coyotes just do what they do. So, yeah. It's deadly stuff. It's a deadly idea. And we don't realize how bad it is. It's not just an academic question.

Joshua Farris:

Yes.

Michael Egnor:

Here's a question. Can you demonstrate God's existence scientifically?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. So I guess it really goes back to a more fundamental question about what we mean by science and what science is. I mean, so there's different answers, obviously, to that question. And there's obviously different positions in church history on this about, can we use nature itself and can we derive certain information from nature itself to demonstrate the existence of God. And there's excellent work in natural theology being done today by philosophers who have made pretty valiant attempts to develop arguments that move in the direction of demonstrating God's existence. And utilizing nature as a sort of independent source that we can derive our premises from, and develop logically airtight arguments that demonstrate God's existence.

Joshua Farris:

And I'm sympathetic to those proposals. And I think, I guess the way that I approach natural theology is more of along the lines of, I think it's better to approach it as this kind of logic of discovery, from a vantage point of ... that already has a pre-commitment to theism. In my case, particularly Christian theism, that has a particular lens on the world, that does a better job of explaining certain things in the world.

Joshua Farris:

Ultimately, theism provides better causal explanation for say, consciousness and the implications following from consciousness, as we were just discussing. Seems to me that the various properties and powers that follow from consciousness lend themselves to all sorts of theistic implications. And this is why many scientists who have developed certain habits want to get away from those consequences. And so they have to effectively eliminate the conscious-self, the free willing-self, in order to avoid those implications to theism.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, so I think there's a robust tradition of looking out into the world and reflecting on God's existence in nature. The famous passage, Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky's proclaim the work of his hands." And I think there's something important about having a sort of attitudinal stance or an approach to nature that comes with this particular lens in surmising the data from nature and seeing what it teaches us from a perspective of wisdom. Our location as human beings who are created in the image of God and recognizing that this is his handy work, and approaching it in that way. So that's, I guess, the manner in which I'm inclined to approach natural theology.

Michael Egnor:

I've argued [inaudible 00:12:18] Mind Matters that I think the definition of science that I like and I think works the best, comes really from the classical philosophers. And that is that science is the systematic study of effects according to their causes. And so it has three characteristics. It's systematic. So it's not just hunches and occasionally doing stuff, but actually sit down and studying it. It's a study of effects of things in nature as they are. And the study is focused on the causes of those effects and the natural science, which is ... oh, and that's scientia. That's science understood most broadly. Which would include theology, which would include ethics and music and all sorts of things. And natural science would be the systematic study of natural effects according to their causes.

Michael Egnor:

And I think that works, especially if one only modifies effects by natural, but not causes by natural. That is that there are effects in nature that have extra-natural causes. Obviously, the big bang. The big bang was the beginning of nature. So whatever caused the big bang was outside of nature. I think that singularities at the core of black holes are extra-natural things. They aren't defined in physics, they're outside of physics.

Joshua Farris:

But they would still be within the domain of science, according to your definition?

Michael Egnor:

Yes, yes. Well, yeah. Of course, yeah. Because singularities are solutions to the field equations of relativity that blow up, that basically go to infinity because something is divided by zero. That is that if you actually do the equations, the number becomes infinitely large, and that's a singularity. And mathematically that's not defined. That is division by zero is not considered a defined function in mathematics. And so singularities within physics, aren't defined. Their effects are defined. That is, they give rise to black holes. And probably, a singularity gave rise to the big bang.

Michael Egnor:

So we can know a singularity by its effects, but we can't know what it is because it's not defined. If you look at the classical ways of knowing God, there are three ways that God can be known. We can't know him in himself as he actually is, at least not in this life. But we can know him by what he is not. We can know him by his effects in the world, and we can know him by analogy, which was St. Thomas ...

Joshua Farris:

That's very Thomistic of you.

Michael Egnor:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yes, yes. That's a classic St. Thomas. But he got a lot from Boethius. I mean, he got a lot from a lot of people ... but yes, yes. And the interesting thing is that if you look at the way science handles singularities, it's the same three. It knows singularities by what they are not. They don't have dimensions. They don't have temperature or color or things like that. They're known by their effects in the world. They gave rise to the big bang. They're at the core of black holes. And we can know them by analogy. Singularities are often depicted as depressions, in like a stretched rubber membrane. If there's rubber membrane in spacetime, a singularity is an infinitely deep depression in that membrane.

Michael Egnor:

So science deals with singularities just the same way as St. Thomas said we had to deal with God. Now, that's not to say that singularities are God, but what it's saying is that science can deal with things outside of nature. And does, all the time. In fact, numbers are outside of nature. The number four is not a natural thing. There are groups of four things in nature. There are four trees in my front yard, blah, blah, blah. Four tires on a car. But the number four is not a thing in nature. It has no location, it has no weight. It has no ... it's not a natural thing. But it's invoked in science constantly.

Michael Egnor:

So there's all kinds of things in science that are not themselves natural causes. So yeah, I think the supernatural can cause things in nature. It does all the time, if we define things that are undefined in the natural world as supernatural.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Okay. Okay. That's a very classical way of approaching ... Yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's good. Okay. No, I appreciate that. So that wouldn't fit very well within the confines of what most are considering methodological naturalism.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, but methodological naturalism is bad science, it's ideological science. It's saying that no matter what the cause of something is, we're going to exclude anything that's not a natural cause, which is junk science. I mean, that's basically saying we don't care what the real cause is. We're going to impose this structure on it, knowing that that could very well lead to causes that aren't real. As I said, the definition of science is the systematic study of natural effects according to causes. Any cause, whether it's natural or supernatural, I think is the best definition of science. If the supernatural cause is the cause, then you go for it.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Yeah. So on your definition, we're basically studying causes and effects. And some are natural and some are supernatural.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Right.

Joshua Farris:

The study of revelation or the theological study of revelation, on that definition would be considered science as well?

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. And the classical philosophers did consider it. I mean, theology was the queen of the sciences. And the only thing that distinguishes science as we know it today is just that it's the study of natural effects. We restrict our study to effects in nature, and that's what natural science is. But we don't restrict our study of causes of those natural effects to nature. The causes can be anything, wherever the evidence leads.

Joshua Farris:

Right. Right, right. So as a practicing scientist, do you think that there is still today, at least in the academic practice of science, is there any place, or at least any robust place for theology to enter into the scientific discussions?

Michael Egnor:

Theology is in all scientific discussions, everything. It's everywhere, either acknowledged or denied. Meaning that ... a very good example of this. I am of the very firmly held opinion that all proofs of God's existence, all of them, are scientific proofs. That is that the notion that science can't prove God ... and many, many, many theists say, well, science can't really prove God. But all genuine proofs of the existence of God, proof meaning inferential lines of reasoning, are scientific proofs. The reason is that in St. Thomas's view ... and I think he's right on this. Existence is absolutely distinct from essence.

Michael Egnor:

So the fact that something exists, what is different from that, basically? That something exists is a different thing than what that something is. And therefore you can't demonstrate the existence of anything, the that-ness of anything, by just describing the what-ness of it. Which means, for example, that the ontological proof is not valid. And St. Thomas famously rejected that proof, because there's no existence in it. There's no evidence. It's a formal logical proof and formal logical proofs cannot prove anything outside of formal logical things. And God is not a formal logical thing, he's an existing thing.

Michael Egnor:

So you have to have evidence to prove the existence of anything. So to prove existence at the end, you have to start with the existence of something. And that's inductive proof. When you start with evidence and then use some formal system to arrive at inference to best explanation, that's an inductive line of reasoning. And science is just inductive reasoning applied to nature. So the proofs of God's existence are also inductive proofs, and they have the same structure as scientific proofs.

Michael Egnor:

A very good example is the prime mover argument. The prime mover argument, basically, is that change exists in nature. And that it is not possible to have an infinite regress of instrumental causes in a system of change, without having at the foundation of this instrumental series of causes, an unmoved mover, a prime mover that is not itself moved. That's a scientific argument. Because you start with the empirical observation of change in nature, and you reason through a formal way to what must be true of the cause of that change. That's the same thing as is done in evolutionary biology. Looking at nature, reasoning back to what causes the change in species. Same thing that's done in physics. What causes this radioactive isotope to emit that electron? So I believe all valid proofs of God's existence are scientific theories.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense, from the way you're describing science. Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

So when you say, can science be done without theology? At least if one is talking about natural theology, science and natural theology are completely intertwined.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. So it seems like an obvious question. I guess as a theologian, and this is something that I ... and we don't have time. But someday I'd love to chat more about, to see how we can develop fruitful research programs to integrate the two a bit more consciously and explicitly in print. So the question seems obvious, but I just don't see a lot of robust theological and scientific engagement taking place right now. And how it is that theology can actually offer any sort of voice in the contemporary scientific conversations.

Joshua Farris:

Or how it is that the scientific practitioner can consciously bring God into the mix and supply a logic that gives us a fruitful way of discerning where God is acting in the present world right now. It's hard for me to see that actually taking place where theology has largely been marginalized in the higher ed systems, at least in the US. And it's almost ... well, it's just almost irrelevant these days. And it's certainly irrelevant in scientific discussions.

Michael Egnor:

Well, it's irrelevant, but it even goes further. If you are a practicing scientist and you bring theology into your science, you're unemployed. That's it. I have a friend who's a leading biologist, who is a devout Christian. And I talked to him one time about intelligent design and all of that. And he said he would give anything to be involved in it because he really believes in it. He said, but if I ever said a word publicly, I would never get another grant.

Joshua Farris:

Right.

Michael Egnor:

And he's exactly right. He would be totally canceled. So in that sense, theology is already in science, in a negative sense. That if you make any appeal to God, you're done. You're done.

Joshua Farris:

That's an interesting way to put it. Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

So there's no separating theology and science. I mean, if you look at, for example, even Aquinas' Five Ways. That the first way by change, the second way by causation, the third by contingent existence, the fourth by degrees of perfection, and then the fifth by regularity in nature. All of them, all of them are scientific statements. Every single one. Change. How do you account for change? There has to be an unmoved mover. That's a scientific line of reasoning.

Michael Egnor:

Change is observed in the world. When you analyze it very carefully, you realize that there has to be something that does not change that begins it. Cause. Causes exist. There has to be an uncaused cause that begins the chain of causes. There has to be a necessary existence to account for things that exist. There has to be an ultimately perfect thing to account for degrees of perfection. And there has to be an intelligent designer to account for regularity in nature. That's all scientific. Every single one of those things is a perfectly reasonable, valid inference in the natural sciences. And every single one of them is explicitly excluded in the way sciences practice nowadays. And if you bring them up, you'll lose your job.

Joshua Farris:

Right. Right, right.

Michael Egnor:

And punishing people for bringing them up, in a sense is theology in science, only it's negative theology. It's that if you bring it up, if you bring theology up in science, you're fired. But that is theology in science, it's just used as a cudgel instead of as an aid.

Joshua Farris:

Right. Yeah. And that's why ... it is difficult right now to articulate in our contemporary situation, how it is that theology can be the queen of the sciences. If it's not functioning in any sort of robust way in how science is conducted and how the conclusions are interpreted.

Michael Egnor:

Well, it depends on how you define theology. If you define theology as including the philosophical and methodological exclusion of inference to God from scientific work ... which I think that is a theological statement. Theology can be negative. If you define theology as including that, then all science nowadays is theological, in a sense that you better not talk about God.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, hmm. Yeah, yeah.

Michael Egnor:

So there's no escaping it. There's just no escaping God. There's no escaping inference to God. You can choose to refer to God in your work, or you could choose to refuse to refer to God and to punish people who do, but it's all theology.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that. That's a very Thomistic way of thinking. I mean, so there are classical reformed ways of thinking about science and theology that's different. I mean, that depart from Thomas. I mean, so you have [Herman Dooyeweerd 00:27:49], the systematic theologian who would say that theology is one science among other sciences, and philosophy serves the foundational role and philosophies foundational to all the sciences. So there's some demarcating role that's given to philosophy as a way of demarcating the different disciplines and how we parse out the different disciplines and their various ... the information that it gives.

Michael Egnor:

Here's a good, I think, retort to that. The notion that philosophy is the foundation of sciences rather than theology. And that is that without theology, there is no real ground for believing in the existence of anything outside of your mind and the validity of your concepts and the validity of your perceptions. I mean, you could ... solipsism makes just as much sense from a purely philosophical perspective as does the ordinary way of looking at the world. How do you know that I really exist? That what you're listening to is coming from a person like you.

Michael Egnor:

At least in theology, the inference is that God is not evil. That God wouldn't deceive you like that. In philosophy, there is no, how do you know? So I don't see how philosophy can be the ground. Because if philosophy is the ground, then you can't even know that the world exists out there. How can you study the natural world if philosophy offers no actual proof that the natural world even exists?

Joshua Farris:

Right. Yeah. I guess you could take philosophy as being rooted in a reliabilist understanding and common sense. And so that's the starting point.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Right. You have to believe that reason is reliable. And in my view, I mean, that cannot be grounded in itself. It has to be grounded elsewhere. And obviously the only other elsewhere on tap would be God. So theology, I think really is the queen of the sciences. And frankly, all scientists practice it. I mean, every scientist is a theologian of sorts.

Joshua Farris:

At least implicitly, despite what they might say, right?

Michael Egnor:

Right ... implicitly. Obviously, very few of them are the least bit aware of it because scientists are almost without exception of the worst philosophers on earth. They're terrible philosophers. And they do things all the time that they don't understand.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. I very much believe ... and I guess this is just my Thomism coming through. That theology is the queen of the sciences. It's the basis for all knowledge. Even when you deny God's existence, you're making theological assumptions.

Joshua Farris:

Right. Right.

Michael Egnor:

But self-reputation is basically the modus operandi of these people anyway.

Joshua Farris:

Uh-huh (affirmative). Right.

Michael Egnor:

So, it has been a delight, Joshua, thank you. And I would love to talk some more. I mean, we could do some more podcasts.

Joshua Farris:

I appreciate it.

Michael Egnor:

Thank you. And to our listeners, this is Mike Egnor from Mind Matters News interviewing Dr. Joshua Ferris. Thank you for listening. Good day.

Announcer:

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