

# Neuroscience, the Mind, and Theism

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor. I have the great pleasure and privilege today to speak with Dr. Joshua Farris. Dr. Farris is the Humboldt Fellow at the Ruhr University of Bochum. He specializes in religious anthropology, and has thought and written very deeply on philosophy of mind. And recently organized a wonderful conference that I had the privilege of being involved with. It was a conference for design and theology project. Welcome Joshua, and thank you for joining us.

Joshua Farris:

Hey, good to be with you, Mike. Thank you.

Michael Egnor:

So I have been looking at a fascinating paper that you recently published in the European Journal of Science and Theology called Descartes' New Clothes: Cartesian Thought in Philosophy, Neuroscience, and Theism, which are three very big topics. And Descartes himself is a very big topic. Could you tell me a little bit about what you wrote in that paper?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, sure. Yeah. So as you stated, philosophy of mind has been interest to me for some time, especially the implications or application of the philosophy of mind to a religious or a theological anthropology. And so this past year in my research, I've been focusing more on cognitive science and biology, and looking at different ways to make sense of that as a real source of knowledge for theological construction or religious construction.

And so one of my projects was this one that you've mentioned, Descartes' New Clothes. And in, it's kind of a different paper than what I've written before because it's a kind of mix between the history of philosophy, the analytic philosophy of mind, and then looking at the implications of those together for theism, of which there is a growing set of literature and fascinating literature that overlaps with both science and philosophy.

And I say that normally, well, I haven't written on this, and typically, these aren't brought together. Typically, historians of philosophers are not kind of doing the same sorts of things as analytic philosophers. There's very much a sort of a niche detailed sort of focus in analytic philosophy. Whereas the history of philosophy, they're looking at larger patterns within history, and sort of philosophical moods, patterns, and signs, and the like.

And so in part, this paper, I've thought about this over the last several years, it wasn't directly related to my fellowship research, but I started thinking about it again last year. And it not only was fascinating to me, but it seemed set up some framework or some background for thinking about where can contemporary philosophy of mind, personal identity discussions have been for the last 60 years or so, and how they've developed.

And so in this paper, in part, it's motivated by Tom Sorell's book, Descartes Reinvented, where he does something similar, which is unusual for an analytic philosopher, to sort of tap into the history of philosophy in a richer way, and bring that into conversation with contemporary analytic philosophical

discussions, which he does in his book. And I come out this to some extent as a theologian or philosophical theologian. And I saw some places to really upgrade some of his thinking, especially as it pertains to neuroscience. And so how some of Descartes' ideas seemed to be in the background of both relevant contemporary analytic discussions as well as neuroscientific discussions.

And these discussions together have live, it seems, implications for theism, and they seem to yield or point to or signify theism in some way. And so as you know, in many of the philosophical as well as scientific discussions, Descartes' kind of a whipping boy. In some ways I argue that his ideas are not only in the background, but he's kind of left a ghost like impression with us that is always there. In an overwhelming sense, he's in the background of these discussions. And so I try to really bring that out in this paper and discuss some of the ways in which that is the case or seems to be the case.

Michael Egnor:

Most moderns would say, well, he's always there for better or worse,. Yeah. But he certainly is always there. What are Descartes' old clothes? That is that you describe his new clothes in your paper. But what are his old clothes? That is, where did he start from in terms of his effort to understand the mind and the body relationship and to understand theology in relation to those things?

Joshua Farris:

Well, so I think his thinking begins really in the development of a book, Rules of Discourse, as well as some of his other works that are behind the scenes in his famous work, the Meditations. Whereas Meditations is in some respects a more mature way of working out his method. And of course, he's responding in his contemporary setting to some of the atomists of the day, as well as the Aristotelians, which he doesn't think can do justice to some of the scientific work.

And he is laying out a kind of new science, and he's doing so in these various works, particularly the Meditations is of particular importance where he's doing this, where he seems to have these central ideas that are prominent throughout the corpus of his writings. And they relate particularly to the nature of mental properties or consciousness. And these properties are so emphasized throughout the corpus of his writings that later on, for those who are attuned to many of his writings, you can see the traces and how these discussions seem to replay themselves again, in other words, in the last really 60 years, especially in contemporary analytic discussions where these discussions are really live again.

So it's a metaphor for his old ideas that he kind of worked out. And then there was a response to him, and there was a rejection of him. And then there was a heightened awareness in the history of philosophy in the 1900s, especially in adopting certain forms of logical positivism and behaviorism, and the rejection of any sort of mental substance, or soul as Descartes calls it in some of his works. Particularly, he uses the soul in his later works that he writes.

But then you stumble across these new discussions, you might say, you might call them new, where there's a rediscovery of difficulties with the nature of consciousness, particularly quality or qualitative experience, as well as the hard problem of consciousness, famously termed by David Chalmers, the contemporary analytic philosopher. And in many ways, these discussions don't look all that different from the discussion that Descartes was having in the day in his response to various philosophical systems that were parallel or very similar to philosophical materialism.

And also the solutions that have been provided quite commonly are both a rejection of Descartes' sort of substantial dualism, but what they do offer in its place isn't really all that much better, or it doesn't seem that it's better at all, in fact. And it doesn't seem to be much of an improvement on Descartes. And some of them are beginning to look a lot more, more and more, like Descartes' substantial dualism. And so those are interesting things. Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

One thing that I've noticed in reading the classical philosophers on the issue of mind body relationship is that the modern dilemmas that we face in understanding that relationship really were not dilemmas for the classical philosophers. For example, qualia was not really a problem for Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and all of the great ancient philosophers. It seemed that these problems kind of began with Descartes. And one might say, well, that's because Descartes recognized that they were a problem. The other philosophers didn't. But that wouldn't be my perspective.

My perspective would be that Descartes created these problems because of his metaphysical underpinnings. That is he separated mental activity from physical existence as two separate substances. And if you assume that physical material things, things that are extended in space, *res extensa*, don't have mental properties. And then you do as the moderns have done and you eliminate mental properties, that you don't believe that the mind has any separate existence whatsoever, then you can't explain them. Because your metaphysics, Descartes' metaphysics, *res extensa*, doesn't include any mental properties. So how do you feel about the critique of Descartes that he created the problems rather than tried to solve them?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I do think that's a common way of looking at Descartes. He kind of created problems. And he actually, some would say that he even was the starting point for a more stubborn sort of materialism that would follow because of the reductionism that he adopted in terms of the mind and in terms of the body. So I see him in a more positive light in that I see what he did highlight, we're seeing sort of picked up and developed in varying sort of positive ways in contemporary analytic discussions. Particularly some of his emphases upon the nature of the ineliminable I or the ineliminable subjectivity. There's something about that that I think was really lost, or at least maybe not lost, but not present in any robust way prior to him in the ancient worldview or in the ancient sort of philosophers that gave primacy of place to the I, the subject, the particularity sort of issue that became kind of heightened or highlighted in modern discussions.

So these notions of what it means to be a person, what it means to be an I, and how the I functions not only grammatically, something that we can't seem to rid ourselves of, there seems to be some sort of mental property that's predicated of an I. And those mental properties have been fleshed out in fascinating ways in recent discussions, in the philosophy of language, particularly as people like Alston, as well as others, like Putnam defending anti-realism, have developed and picked up on these insights from Descartes and run with them in different ways.

But I think some of the other ideas are related to that, and that is the nature of self-authority and the fact that within Descartes' system, we have this emphasis upon some kind of epistemological authority that seems to be primitive in where we predicate our authority. At some level, we predicate authority to the I that's having the thoughts about their own experiences in the world. And this is related as well to his discussions about the nature of consciousness as something that is irreducible, certainly irreducible to matter. It's altogether distinct from matter.

And so I think either we do depart from some of his stronger theses, or we take up some of his ideas and sort of mold them into a sort of newer form of Aristotelianism or something, I think there's still a really positive stamp that Descartes has left that has really brought clarity to some of the scientific and philosophical discussions because him and his emphasis upon, well, how do we arrive at some sort of authoritative understanding of science itself? Well, we do so by clarifying our ideas, making distinctions between those ideas, which are all hallmarks of the analytic tradition, which I think, again, hearkens

back to Rene Descartes in his emphasis upon his whole method of meditation and arriving at sufficiently clear ideas about what it is that we're talking about when we're talking or when I'm talking, right?

And so I see his legacy as, I guess, much more positive, maybe too positive for some. And all of this is related to a bigger picture of his epistemological project of foundationalism, which I think too is something that is widely discussed today in philosophical and scientific discussions. And again, that hearkens back to Descartes' ghost that he has left with us.

Michael Egnor:

And quick, could you briefly describe foundationalism?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. So Descartes, so he was really interested in this project of undermining philosophical skepticism. And in order to undermine philosophical skepticism, he had to highlight and reassert the authority of the I, and the I as having some sort of inner perspective or privileged access to one's own thoughts that proceed some sort of third person thought or some sort of empirical method. And foundationalism was later developed as an epistemological position that has a set of philosophical axioms that serve as the foundation for knowledge itself.

And so arguably Descartes is largely responsible for those contemporary discussions that we're having now about, oh, what are the foundations of knowledge and how can we have any sort of certainty? And there's different degrees of certainty, of course, what we mean by that. I don't necessarily mean some sort of absolute certainty. But how can we arrive at certainty of knowledge that undermines the sort of philosophical skepticisms of the day that we can have any knowledge or we can know anything at all. And so we have to reintroduce this notion of the subject, and the subject as being the sort of primary place in which we begin to arrive at knowledge of things in the world.

Michael Egnor:

He's famous for his aphorism, I think therefore I am. And it certainly does appear, at least on first glance, to be the one thing that we can be sure of. That is, even if we doubt our own existence, we have to exist in order to doubt. But I've had a problem with that perspective in that it is possible to think but not to exist if there are no laws of logic, there are no laws of necessity. That is the term therefore I see as the most important word in the I think therefore I am sentence. That is, if logic doesn't apply in the world, then you could think and not exist. Because there's no therefore. There's no logic connecting the two.

So it would seem to me that the thing that you can be the most certain of is the existence of a logical framework in creation, which I think points to God's mind. That is what we're living in is essentially the logical framework of the divine mind. So I feel as though he didn't go deep enough in the assertion I think therefore I am. Because it really is an affirmation of the reality of cause and effect of logic.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. I don't want to press too hard to defend Descartes, what exactly he meant by the sort of cogito. There's one thesis by a Descartes scholar that says that, well, he was defending basically an axiom. An axiom that is the product of common sense, and rather than this sort of airtight argument. But I do think picking up on the epistemologist Roderick Chisholm, I think he develops something that I think is implicitly Cartesian in character, and along these lines that there is this ineliminable cogito that we can be certain of, or sure of, and maybe have even infallible certainty. Now, that's too strong. Maybe, but maybe that's too strong. I don't know.

But it can certainly provide or furnish a part of the foundations of our knowledge that is the most certain thing that we can know if there is a logical structure in the world. He says, "Well, we arrive at the knowledge of the logical structure by this sort of ineliminable I." And Roderick Chisholm calls these sort of self-presenting properties that for us to have access or any sort of awareness of any sort of logical structure as providing the foundations for a knowledge, he would too say that for us to have that, there's always a property of presentation that is present and distinct from representation. And so there is some sort of self presentation that is always implicit in our knowledge of what is within the logical framework of the world. And so that becomes something that is foundational.

And Roderick Chisholm is doing something kind of different than Husserl. Husserl is very Cartesian also in his sort of phenomenological project. And in his phenomenological project, where he takes basically, phenomenology as a project that takes a phenomenal experience as somehow basic and a basic indicator of what is in the world and what we can know. And it serves as, for him, well, the inverse of the Kantian sort of transcendental.

And anyway, in his phenomenological structure, Husserl develops these ways in which we actually do have this intentional relation between our consciousness, our conscious awareness, and the things that we come to know so that we can know when we come to know something in our phenomenological experiences, that there's always this intentional structure that it's already rooted in. Which presupposes an I that is metaphysically certain or unchallenged. And we can have certainty about it, at least some sort of psychological certainty, if not, well, epistemic certainty.

And of course, you have some contemporary epistemologists, only a few in the world, not very many, who are arguing, well, we actually have metaphysical certainty about these things and about the fact of the I that lends credence to a sort of apodictic certainty about things in the world. So I think it's kind of hard to eliminate the cogito structure that Descartes so famously pressed upon the social awareness and the history of philosophy. I think it's hard to kind of excise that from our system.

Michael Egnor:

Eleonore Stump, who I'm sure you know, she's a philosopher who kind of works from an Aristotelian perspective, she's at St. Louis University, has argued, as have many philosophers, that we don't really have certainty at all. That is that there is absolutely nothing that we can be certain of. One might even say that you can't even be certain that there is no certainty. That we are completely dependent upon faith of one sort or another to make sense of existence. That we cannot get by without faith.

And her argument for the existence of God is that a theist, certainly a Christian theist, believes in a rational God who created a rational universe with cause and effect that can be understood, and with laws of logic. And that he wouldn't deceive us. So our faith in the rationality of existence is grounded, it's well grounded metaphysically. It's still faith. It's still a radical faith, but it's grounded. Whereas an atheist, or someone who denies the rationality of God has no ground for their faith, and they have faith no less than the Christian theists do. So I mean, I certainly don't doubt that I exist, but I do doubt that that can be demonstrated without faith in the validity of logic and reason, and still faith.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. I guess I would have to look at her argument in more detail. I think, even if it's faith, there's still this self-presentation that is... It's hard for me to know that I can know that there's these logical principles that are real, that exist in the world, and that exist in a way that I could know without knowing that I also exist.

Michael Egnor:

Well, Wittgenstein perhaps spoke to this, not about Stump, but to this dilemma, I think rather nicely in saying that, I just paraphrase him, that there are two ways that we think of as knowing. One is to know in terms of perception and conception and so on. And the other is to experience things. And experiencing something is not a kind of knowing really. It's just experiencing. For example, I can know if someone else has a pain based on how they behave. They can say ouch and shake their finger and things like that. But that's not how I experience pain. I just experience it. And what I experience is not a kind of knowledge. It's not an epistemological question, it's an experiential question.

Now, if I wanted to know that I have pain, I could look at myself in the mirror, and see how I behaved and infer from the way I behaved in the mirror that I was having pain. But I don't need to do that because I'm actually having the pain. But having the pain isn't a knowledge about my pain. It's just having it. And one could say that may trace back to Descartes, who I guess kind of said that there is this undeniable I, this undeniable essence of me that you can't get around. And I think that that is true, but I don't know that that kind of I can be demonstrated logically. It's just a matter of experience.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, this is interesting. It takes us into a discussion that I wouldn't claim to be an expert on. I would say this though, I mean, when we're looking at say, the philosophy of beliefs and philosophy of experience, some might argue, like Edmund Husserl and Roderick Chisholm, that there is a sort of intentional framework that is implicit knowledge already that we have knowledge of. We know that's implicit in all of our experience. And without that intentional structure, our experience, the experienceables, or the qualias would not make any sense apart from that intentional structure, which itself is implicitly knowable, even if it's not something we could articulate or something that we have awareness of, or, I guess, well just articulatable knowledge. I was looking for the technical term, but my mind is failing me at the moment.

But I think this comes down to this bigger discussion about the categorical nature of foundational items within one's epistemic wherewithal. And so Edmund Husserl talks about this as being implicitly Cartesian in nature because of the intentional structure that is set up between the I and the properties that an I can have about the world that is already presumed or grounded in this broader sort of intentional structure of seemings and intuitions. So if we have these seemings, these seemings are already rooted in certain intuitions that we have that are sturdy, reliable, and can't be excised from one's system.

So he makes the further argument that there is a sort of intentional structure that goes beyond the epistemic and even the linguistic structure that we exist within and experience to a sort of metaphysical structure that is present therein. And so those are fascinating discussions that take us into deeper discussions about the nature of whether or not Descartes was right about some of his own ideas that seemed to furnish the foundations for his overall sort of project, his new science project.

And I wouldn't be so confident to defend all of his ideas, although I'm very sympathetic to them, and I think he might be right. But again, in some ways, I think he's highlighted things that were not there prior to himself that are very positive and good. But also I think he's really working within a broader, rather than explicitly Aristotelian framework, a broader Augustinian framework that I think he really just extends into the modern day.

Michael Egnor:

Well, let's speak more about that in our next segment. Joshua, thank you so much. It's been a fascinating discussion. This is Mike Egnor. I've been talking with Joshua Farris. We will have a second segment on this. Thank you, Joshua.

Joshua Farris:

Thank you.

Announcer:

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