

Discussing the Cartesian Error

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep250>

Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor. I have the privilege and pleasure to have a conversation with my friend and colleague, Dr. Joshua Farris. Dr. Farris is the Humboldt Fellow at the Ruhr University of Bochum, and his specialty is in religious anthropology. And he recently organized a wonderful conference that I had the pleasure of being involved with called a Conference for Design and The Theology Project. So Joshua, welcome.

And we had discussed on our last session the impact of Rene Descartes' metaphysics and his philosophy of mind in our modern world. And you've written a paper called Descartes' New Clothes, Cartesian Thought and Philosophy, Neuroscience and Theism. Could you shed some light on how Descartes' perspective informs modern neuroscience?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Yeah, thank you. Yeah, so I think related to this sort of the contemporary analytic philosophy of mind discussions, there are these stamps or imprints that Descartes has left on the discussion historically that the wheel kind of seems to come back around to Descartes once again in terms of the kinds of problems that he's dealing with, particularly what we now think of as the hard problem of consciousness and relatedly, to the solutions that are being offered that are surprisingly looking more and more like Descartes solution and his, what many or most think of as a kind of robust or strong, substantial dualism where there are these property bearers that are radically distinct. Property bearers two different types of substances, namely, the body that has spatial extension and the mind that is altogether distinct from the body and whether or not it is spatially located.

Obviously, this is a fascinating philosophical discussion. And as to whether or not thoughts themselves are spatial in some way, the fact of the matter is that there's something about the nature of thoughts and thinking and properties that are predicable of minds or characteristic of the mind itself are distinct from the body in a way that it makes the two different and strongly so in similar ways as Descartes would and has described in many of his writings. And so, there's a variety of solutions that are on offer today, and many of them that are really trying to wrestle with the hard problem of consciousness and take the mind seriously, many philosophers would say that that many philosophers as well as scientists who are scientists of the mind, don't take the mind seriously, and in fact, are constantly trying to talk about the mind in ways that reduce it and effectively eliminate the mind or the properties of the mind.

And this is something that the philosopher, Stephen Priest, has talked about when he describes the sort of conditioned paradigm, which is prevalent in many of the discussions on the mind, particularly the science of consciousness, discussions that are quite prominent. What they end up doing is they end up functioning according to these conditioned patterns of thought that serve or act in a way or intentionally act in a way toward the mind as if it is just this object, this part, this third person thing that we can know about from an objective standpoint as an external observer of it, and we can then make sense of it in a rigorously scientific way.

And I think some of these dynamics are, not only present in the analytic philosophy of mind discussions with their varying solutions that try to reduce everything to one singular set of properties that try to bring together the material and the mental properties, we're seeing these heavily sort of philosophical discussions prop up again or come up again in a lot of the, it seems, much of the neuroscience science

literature or the neuroscience of consciousness and self literature of which, I've only recently, in the last year or so, have started trying to digest that literature.

And there are noticeable traces and patterns that are reflective of similar patterns in contemporary philosophy of mind that are fascinating, but also, again, point us back to Descartes and the irreducibility of consciousness to matter and the fact of the distinction, this radical distinction between the two types of property bearers that cannot be reducible one to the other. In fact, as we talked about before, it seems that there's this implicit distinction between them that is present in the discussions that we're constantly wrangling with. And it comes up again in neuroscience as well.

Michael Egnor:

But those implicit distinctions seem to have come from Descartes. That is, it is not only that Descartes has struggled, and people who followed in his footsteps have struggled in very admirable way to try to make sense of all this. But it was the metaphysical framework that Descartes proposed that kind of got us into this mess to begin with. And what some people have called our modern way of trying to understand nature is kind of a mechanical natural philosophy that human beings are in some sense machines. And we try to find the ghost, we try to find what it is in the human machine that accounts for the mind. And of course, Descartes himself believed that animals lacked souls, that they were simply meat machines. But the philosophers who worked from a hylomorphic perspective, which many, if not most of the ancient philosophers did, didn't struggle with this, this wasn't a problem for them because in the hylomorphic perspective, we're not machines and the mind emerges in a rather natural way from the understanding of the human being from the hylomorphic perspective.

Joshua Farris:

Okay. Yeah. So I think this is interesting. So there's one way to get at this discussion. And going back to Stephen Priest, he talks about these sort of conditioned philosophies of which the empirical sciences of consciousness would fall into that category. And he says we need to experience a kind of deconditioning to open up the discussion, but by opening up the discussion, I think it's going to lead us back to Descartes and his kind of substantial dualism.

And here's where I think one of the interesting discussions comes in. There are these two sort of common ideas or key features you might say that are reflected in some of the neuroscience of self and consciousness literature that continue to sort of represent themselves. One is in this notion of internalism, and the other that's overlapping and related is this notion of Cartesian materialism.

So internalism is this idea that the properties of consciousness or the properties of the mind, mental properties, are predicable of physical properties themselves or neural properties. So, there's this conditioned, you might say, this patterned tendency from neuroscientists of consciousness to simply look at brain scans and see in those brain scans, when they see certain spatial regions or neurons firing, to see mental properties in them and to predicate mental properties to them.

But this underlying philosophical question that I think Descartes and the Cartesians are right about is that there is this sense in which these two don't touch and we can't simply predicate mental properties of neural properties because what ends up happening, and there's a whole method in here that I kind of spell out in the paper that seems pretty clear across some of the more popular, prominent sort of neuroscientists of the self that specifically led that literature. There's a whole vast set of neuroscience literature that I haven't even... And you know a lot more about that, so I... But particularly the neuroscience literature that's trying to deal with the self and consciousness, there are these language adoption strategies, these methods that they use in order to systematically sort of excise or root out this

sort of Cartesian idea that there are these properties that they are saying are actually predicable of the neural properties and somehow internal to those neural properties.

But what they end up doing, they end up saying things that not only become sort of philosophically fascinating, but problematic, I think from a materialist vantage point, and maybe even from a monist vantage point, more generally, is that they end up predicating these properties and saying that, hey, the mental property is here at this point by sort of doing brain maps and doing sort of neural connection maps and saying, hey, the mental property is here at this point, but just not in the same way that the neural property is here at this point. So, there's this kind of mysterious kind of magic trick that they end up doing and then, there's this whole elaborate sort of language adoption strategy so that they can root out speaking about minds as if they are actually minds with these distinct types of properties that are already implicit in our discussion about the brain and the mind itself.

And so, I think that's problematic, this notion of internalism, this predication of mental properties to the neural properties themselves simply because say, maybe there's a causal triggering or there's some sort of trigger in the neural map that seems to bring about or causally bring about certain mental ideas or experiences or feelings or things of that sort, that that means that somehow they are identical, they're reducible, they are somehow even spatially present there. If they are spatially present, which I'm not sure about, they're certainly not spatially present in the way that the neurons are spatially present and can be quantified. If they're present, they have to be there present in a different way, which becomes interesting and mysterious.

Michael Egnor:

It's difficult to say that a mental state or a mental entity could be spatially present because of several reasons, one is that we never refer to the location of a mental entity in a way that matters, that is that Einstein didn't distinguish $E = mc^2$ from when he thought about it in Berlin as opposed to when he thought about it in Paris. Location doesn't seem to play into mental entities in the same way as it does to physical entities.

We'd spoken in our last session a little bit about eliminative materialism for which I have a great deal of disdain. However, my disdain is because it's materialistic, not because it's eliminative. I really think that if a materialist is consistent in his metaphysics, he has to be an eliminative materialist because you can't have mind in a materialist metaphysic, it just doesn't work.

How do you feel about eliminative materialism as a philosophical perspective?

Joshua Farris:

Oh, how do I feel? I feel awful about it. I think it's awful. I think it's terrible. And JP Moreland brings this out in some of his works in philosophy of mind. I think many of the other sort of reductive physicalist solutions, at the end of the day, they just become eliminativist. And in what they do to the mental properties themselves, they end up not capturing or saving the reality of mental properties themselves.

But this is, I think in many ways, the examples that I use in the paper, many of the neuroscientists of the self and consciousness are, whether they explicitly say it or not, or even whether they know it or not, they end up adopting a kind of eliminativist approach to mental properties in practice.

And one of the key examples that I cite, and I think not an unimportant example, is from the famous a neuroscientist, Shaun Gallagher, who's written on self and consciousness from a, I guess you call it, neuroscience perspective. He and Kai Vogeley, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that name correctly, they begin their article, ironically, in this place where they say, look, we want to get back to a kind of objective science of the matter concerning matter, I'm using that in a non-technical way, a scientific

understanding of the self and consciousness, and we want to get back to something that's more objective that we can rely on.

And so, what they end up saying is, well, there's ways we can do this and we're going to lay out or map out for you how we can do this as neuroscientists that will give us more objectivity and certainty about these things. And then, right up front they say, well, what this means we're not doing is we're not doing metaphysics, we're not doing the nasty sort of religious, theological stuff that some people are doing when they talk about souls and stuff like that.

Michael Egnor:

It's like a fish saying that he's not swimming. I mean, you're sort of living in this ocean of metaphysics and even the denial of metaphysics is metaphysical, so there's no way around it.

Joshua Farris:

Right. Right. Yeah, it is fascinating the kind of delusions. Maybe they really believe it, but toward the end, they end up citing Daniel Dennett, who is, at least in the literature, recognized as being a sort of eliminative materialist of some sort. He eliminates the mental properties of qualia. Qualia is just... I can't remember exactly how he puts it, but it's either it's a fiction or there's another common set of literature that says it's an illusion. It's not real, in other words. And so, they end up adopting a sort of Dennett perspective that is deeply metaphysical in its own right and eliminativist, and they take this just to be the scientific or condition perspective, the objective perspective.

Michael Egnor:

The irony, of course, is that Dennett's denial of the reality of qualia, one has to consider that, I'm sure, he still uses Novocaine in the dentist's office, that there is an undeniable aspect of qualia, of the experience that even a clever philosopher like Dennett can't really make go away. Pain still hurts, and it's not an illusion.

Joshua Farris:

That's right. Yeah, when you're listening to him talk about these things, it's hard to believe, at one level, that he really believes this.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. But I do have some respect for eliminative materialists in the sense that I think that they have thought deeply enough about the philosophical contradictions or the logical contradictions inherent to materialist philosophy that they have to jettison something, and they're so wedded to their materialism that they won't jettison that, so they jettison the mind instead.

But my problem with Descartes, and it's a problem that goes very deep for me, is I think he caused it, that is that I think the modern mechanical way of looking at the relationship between the mind and the body is a Cartesian error, and the error has been catastrophic for our way of understanding a human person. So I know Descartes struggled mightily to try to overcome this, and people who followed in his footsteps do the same, but it's a problem he caused.

And so, I really think that getting back to the hylomorphic understanding of reality, of matter understood as instantiation rather than as extension in space and form understood as intelligibility is the best way to get at this, that the soul is the form of the body. It solves a lot of problems.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, that's interesting. I'm not sure which direction we should take this. One thing I would say is this, I'm not prepared to give to strong of a critique of hylomorphism at the moment. I'm not inclined in that direction just because still to this day, years ago, I was a sort of Thomist dualist of a sort. And then, when I started grappling with Descartes, Cartesianism and Cartesians, especially more lately, the rigorous Cartesian epistemological literature, I started realizing the radical difference between mental properties and physical properties, it seems now to be undeniable to me.

Well, you might say it creates problems. It certainly creates a sort of radical, sort of epistemological dualism that is, because of Descartes, unavoidable. There are at least two different ways of knowing that are radically distinct and one can't really say much about the other. In particular, all these things that we're dealing with, if we were to recognize what was so clear in Descartes, we would realize that neuroscience, in some respects, has little to say about the actual mental properties themselves and what we can know through various mental ways of knowing through experience and through first person reports and first person ways of knowing.

Michael Egnor:

Well, it seems to me that what neuroscience can say about the mind-body relationship is wholly correlation, that is that a neuroscientist can say that there's a certain pattern of neuronal activity that correlates with a certain kind of mental activity. And that's perfectly valid. I mean, that's nothing wrong with that. And that's good science. When scientists attempt to address causation, they are immediately into metaphysics, that is you can't escape that.

And if you're attempting to address mental effects from physical causes, you couldn't pick a worse place to start than Cartesian philosophy, which separates the two as completely different substances and then, makes up a story about the pineal gland. I mean, it is wrong in so many ways that if one tries to use that metaphysical framework, you lose from the very beginning. You can't explain causation, mental causation.

So neuroscientists, I encourage, have at it. Correlation is a fascinating thing, and that's where all the good neuroscience takes place is in documenting correlations between brain activity and mental states. But once you get into causation, you're into metaphysics, and we need better metaphysics than we have right now.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Well, I'm not sure if I see the problem of sort of the Cartesians and what they're proposing in terms of causation. I think you're getting at something else and I'm trying to understand it. But there is an interesting sort of inclination or disposition in the philosophy of mind literature. David Skrbina, a philosopher of mind raises this in one of his articles in a collection called Contemporary Dualism, edited by Andrea Lavazza and Howard Robinson. And he argues that materialism is wrongheaded. Right. He's clear about that because of the nature of qualitative experience and maybe some other things he would grant that are not accommodated on any sort of materialism or physicalism.

But dualism, he says, is problematic because there seems to be this underlying intuition that mental properties and physical properties are somehow unified in a sort of monistic way. And so, his intuitions lie with monism, even though he's radically convinced that materialism is a non-starter and it doesn't adequately account for phenomenal quality and things of that sort. It doesn't take the mind serious enough. And so, we need something like a monism.

And so, I wonder if these are probably where your motivations lie with him. Now he goes in a more panpsychist direction, but not hylomorphous. But he certainly has that sort of intuition that these things are united in a way that Descartes separated and we need to get back to the unity of the mental and the physical properties.

This is something interesting in the case for dualism pointed out by Richard Fumerton that I think is really fascinating and he's making a Cartesian case here, "At the most foundational level, the fact that we know things about the physical world, the natural world, the natural processes is because it's already predicated upon this phenomenological standpoint." The fact that we know these things is already mediated by the fact of our phenomenological standpoint in the world, our first person standpoint. And without that, we wouldn't know the world and we wouldn't know implicitly that the world and physical bodies themselves are distinct from the phenomenological perspective of which he takes his properly basic within our epistemic wherewithal. And that basic Cartesian idea not only seems to press at sort of metaphysical distinctions between the sort of Aristotelian framework and Cartesian framework. But even if we don't press that far, it seems to press to this deeper epistemological problem that monisms may have.

Michael Egnor:

Of the various monistic ways of understanding the mind and the body, and I really do think that the correct way of understanding will be some kind of monistic perspective. I have quite a bit of sympathy for idealism, particularly for a subjective idealism of Berkeleys. And in modern philosophy of mind, idealism is often kind of left out. How do you feel about the idealist way of understanding mind and body? Is it a real option today?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, so I think the sort of subjective idealism, sort of Berkeley's idealism I think is really compelling and it makes a lot of sense and does a lot of work for us philosophically. From this sort of more epistemological issue, on the other side of this sort of philosophical problem of causation, if there is a sort of interaction problem, which I go back and forth, I'm not sure that there is really an interaction problem, most people think there is an interaction problem, if you affirm or assume dualism, a sort of substantial dualism of Descartes sort, and if that is the case, then I think idealism is a much better solution in dealing with the interaction problem between these two radically different distinct types of substances.

I think idealism does a lot of work for us, I think it's elegant, I think it's beautiful. I think theologically, it's beautiful because on Berkeley's understanding, it is simply God's mind communicating to us. And so, everything that occurs in the world has a sort of integrity already built into it by the Divine mind. And so, that's beautiful and elegant.

At one level, epistemically, it still is dualistic for us because we're still interacting phenomenologically with the world that there is at least this empiricist, well, Berkeley was an empiricist, there's this empiricist impulse that, again, going back to Richard Fumerton, that he picks up on, that there are these two radically distinct ways of knowing that, for us, cannot be traversed or solved.

I mean, at some highly theoretical way, we might say, well, they are resolved in the Divine mind, but for us, Berkeley was still working with, it seems to me, this sort of implicit dualism that Descartes made so clear between these distinct types of properties. And that implicit mind-body dualism is still present in Berkeley, but the metaphysics there, obviously, is different.

Idealism is one of those things that it's hard to critique and come to any sort of definitive conclusion about whether or not it's metaphysics are right. From an epistemic vantage point, I'm still sort of in the sort of Cartesian world.

Michael Egnor:

Sure. My own perspective is sort of drawn from science, just that that's sort of where I professionally kind of came into these philosophical questions. So I instinctively, for better or worse, tend to think of it in terms of how does science inform our understanding of metaphysics? And I came to Thomist dualism because in neuroscience, I believe there's a very, very clear distinction between causation of abstract thought and causation of concrete thought. That's a huge topic that we could go into.

But there are lots of experiments in neuroscience that show that brain activity, vis-a-vis, concrete thought, correlates very closely with the concrete thought. By concrete thought, I mean, perception and memory and sensation and things like that where you're actually perceiving an object, whereas brain activity correlates very poorly with abstract thought.

And that falls right out of the hylomorphic Aristotelian-Thomist way of understanding the soul. So that struck me as being very powerful evidence in favor of the hylomorphic perspective.

The idealist perspective, I think, falls very powerfully out of modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics. Many years ago, I was taken back, I mean, it just took my breath away when it was pointed out that there's no such thing as an individual electron. For example, when we talk about the mass of the subatomic particle like an electron, we don't talk about the average mass, it's not as if you measured the mass of a hundred electrons and took an average, there is only one mass. Electrons cannot be distinguished from one another, you can't put a label on a subatomic particle and follow it around and know it's the same particle a minute later. And that's quite astonishing.

And my friend Bruce Gordon with Discovery Institute, and I have talked about this quite a bit, and Bruce is an idealist metaphysically, and he points out that when you look at the basic structure of matter, when you get down into quantum mechanics, it's all equations, that it's not hard, little balls flying around, it's concepts, it's mathematic equations.

So I think at the most rudimentary level, existence itself is an idea. And even mass itself that comes in with the Higgs boson, it's still expressed mathematically. So the way I tend to think of it is that I think idealism is true, I think idealism is a good way to look at things. I think all of creation, including us are ideas in God's mind, but God's a Thomist, that is that God structures his ideas in creation in a way that was best understood from the Aristotelian-Thomist perspective. That's my own take on things.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Well, again, I'm very sympathetic to idealism and for the reasons you point out in terms of, at its base level... What do we have in physics? I mean, Bruce Gordon has argued in a couple of different places that, at its base, we have information that's predicable of the mind, not hard bits of matter or particles all the way down, or even particles that are mirror sort of material. At some fundamental level, there's information and that presupposes a mind. And I think that's very hospitable in a sort of Cartesian frame, particularly because of his Augustinianism. I think Augustine was an idealist of a sort, but he was different, a different kind of idealist than Berkeley was. I mean, he was obviously more of a rationalist in his inclinations concerning ideas that exist in the world and frame and shape the world. And so, a different kind of idealist, which I'm very sympathetic to.

And I think, arguably, Descartes could be there as well, that would take a lot of historical work. Obviously, we won't go into that. But I think it's a hospitable place for idealism at that level.

I think what you're pointing out about the tensions within Cartesianism, maybe his overall system, globally, is problematic in that way, but I think more at a local level, in terms of the mind and the body relationship and possibly the interaction problem, that there seems to be these problems. This isn't Superbowl problems that we can't get around if we are Cartesians.

Ironically, at one level, I think it is intuitive because there are these radically distinct types of properties. But at another level, you might say it's not intuitive because there are these types of properties that the Cartesian is assuming that makes it problematic. And Cartesians will often give this sort of response. I think they will say that there's often this assumed, sort of intentional understanding of matter on the Cartesian system that sort of creates a problem for the Cartesian, that the Cartesian says, "No, there's no problem here, it doesn't exist. There is no interaction problem, there are these two distinct types of properties, and that's fundamental to our epistemic wherewithal and that's where we began." But to presume that there is some sort of interaction problem because there are these two distinct types of substances, well, that's presupposing a problem that it's not clear that there is a problem.

Michael Egnor:

I think the interaction problem can be solved in a rather straightforward way in the sense of Aristotle's four causes, that is that if you think only in terms of material and efficient causation, then you have a problem, then you have an interaction problem with a mental substance and a physical substance. But if you think in terms of formal or final causation, you can understand how the formal cause doesn't involve things bumping against one another in a kind of Newtonian way. The problem though is that what that means is that in order to solve the interaction problem, you have to be a hylomorphist, which sort of takes you out of the Cartesian world. So I think Descartes needs Aristotle to solve his interaction problem, but his metaphysics is a denial of Aristotle. So that's why I think his metaphysics is so deeply misguided is that it takes away the tools that are necessary for even Cartesian metaphysics to work.

Joshua Farris:

I'm not strongly committed, but I don't see the interaction problem. If there is an interaction problem, as one Cartesian has put it, it's a problem for all, and if it's a problem for all, then it's a problem for none.

Michael Egnor:

Within the framework of Cartesian metaphysics, how is it possible for a mental substance or a soul substance to interact with a material substance?

Joshua Farris:

I get it at one level, but I don't feel the push of having to reconcile the two, there's just a singular relation between the mind and the body itself, and that's just where we began.

Michael Egnor:

I mean, I struggled with the interaction problem, and by the way, I'm not completely opposed to substance dualism, mainly because I think it is by far the best metaphysical framework for understanding near-death experiences-

Joshua Farris:

Yes.

Michael Egnor:

... and various mystical... that screams substance dualism. So I hope idealism will rescue me in that respect. But yes, so substance dualism I don't think is completely wrongheaded, I think there's a large body of science that gives it some credibility. But I struggled with the interaction problem because I do think it's a problem, and I realized that the Aristotelian four causes is the only way I can think of to solve it. But as soon as you invoke Aristotelian four causes, you're into a hylomorphic metaphysics, which kind of takes you out of Cartesian physics. So I can't solve the interaction problem without denying the validity of Descartes' understanding of the world.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I think Descartes' dualism, actually, at one level, does press up against a kind of idealism, so there is a unity there, but that's a deeper metaphysical issue. I would like to see someone work on this. Well, actually, my friend who wrote... What's this? ... The Irreducibility of Human Personhood, he's a hylomorphist himself. He's inclined in the idealist direction. I would love to see the hylomorphism worked out in an explicitly idealist way. From my vantage point, I think, actually, Cartesianism works quite well with a version, at some metaphysical level, it does find a place in kind of Divine idealism that Augustine seems to be committed to.

Michael Egnor:

Well, you can make a case, certain people have, of course, that Aristotle himself was a Platonist, that they all come from Aristotle. So I don't see the hylomorphic perspective as necessarily not a form of idealism, I think it is. And if my memory serves me right, JP Moreland used the term, was it a deep hylomorphism? That is that there's kind of a superficial kind of hylomorphism that tries to explain things acting like billiard balls in terms of hylomorphic theory. But then, there's a deeper hylomorphism, for example, that understands matter as pure potency, as pure potentiality, as potentiality and act rather than matter and form. And on that deeper kind of hylomorphism, I think that's quite idealistic.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, yeah, maybe. At the end of the day, I think it's a viable program and project. I think because of the radically distinct natures of substances that furnish a ground for the separability of the person from the body itself, I think Descartes' dualism does a better job. I think also in terms of at the epistemological sort of concerns that are raised earlier about the nature of the mind and the body or properties of the mind and then, distinct properties of the body, I think Cartesianism is probably true.

And then, there's this whole other question that we sort of touching upon, and that's the nature of intentionality as being a fundamental mark of the mind or one of the markers of the mind, like privileged access that I think a sort of Cartesian framework, both in terms of his metaphysics and epistemology are a more conducive sort of hospitable home for those sorts of realities that we seem to have access to when we reflect deeply upon our own phenomenological stances or places in the world. But I do think maybe the challenge, and I'm not sure if it's a problem, the challenge for the Cartesian would be there is this sort of intuitive, maybe even common sense understanding that the body supplies some sort of information to the mind about the mind that is maybe a challenge or harder to make sense of on Cartesianism. I'm not sure if it's a problem, it's just harder.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. But my sense is that in order to understand that interaction between matter and soul, you have to go out of Cartesianism, you need metaphysical resources that Descartes hasn't provided, so why stay in

Cartesianism? That's been my perspective is that I think it was just a mistake. It doesn't mean that there are not very important, valid things that Descartes said, but his metaphysical project as a whole, I think, is just a misguided.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No, I understand where you're coming from. I think that's interesting. I'd be interested to think or hear what you think about sort of the theistic implications from Aristotelianism because it seems to me that sort of the Cartesian framework or Descartes' framework that he's coming from, which is very Augustinian, provides us with a really nice, attractive way of thinking about sort of what is fundamental or foundational to the world that has implications for theism itself. I mean, I'm inclined in that more Augustinian, even Platonic way that Descartes was in contrast to sort of the Aristotelian framework that I think even John Calvin was, he's inclined in these ways more so. And I think that's an interesting line of research and exploration.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, I think what Descartes got right was his Platonism. The Platonic framework, I think, is basically correct. And so, I think what Descartes got was the extent that he was a Platonist. But I think he got a lot wrong and he got a lot misguided. And I think Berkeley, as people who come at the metaphysics from a Platonic standpoint, was much closer to the truth. And in some sense, what I really reject is mechanical philosophy, is an understanding of nature and of living things as machines of some sort, and I think that's extremely misguided.

Joshua Farris:

Some Cartesians argue for this unavoidable sort of Cartesianism, this unavoidable Cartesian cogito that we've talked about or talked around. Do you think that Aristotle's perspective... Well, let me step back. It seems to me that the cogito that Descartes develops, especially in the meditations, leads him very quickly to the conclusion that God. The soul and God are so intimately tied together in his framework and his thinking, and he just really looks Augustinian here, especially Augustine in the confessions and things that I think...

How do we get at the soul? We get it through the cogito. And that cogito is a clear and distinct idea that we have about the nature of the mind itself and the properties that minds have that are characteristic of it that signifies or points us directly to God. Something like what John Calvin and his Institutes picks up on at the beginning of the Institutes, he starts having this reflection. And he sounds very Augustinian in that way, in that he's saying there's such an emphasis upon the immaterial that is very Platonic that can only make sense in this wider context of God himself. But how we work out that sort of foundational metaphysical level, it seems they're so intimately tied together, which is basically the sort of Cartesian idea.

Michael Egnor:

But it seems to me that Berkeley cut at that relationship between human experience, human existence in God in a way that, for me, seems much more satisfactory, with his subjective idealism, the idea that all that exists is spirit and perception, that things exist for us only as perceptions. It doesn't mean that physical things don't exist, but just that their existence is a perceptual existence. And that way of looking at it, I think, answers even questions in quantum mechanics.

A very good example is the observer effect in quantum mechanics that an object in nature doesn't exist with defined characteristics until it's observed, that is until you have collapse of quantum wave form,

which appears to be a very solid finding of quantum mechanics, but extremely difficult to understand metaphysically. However, if we understand all of creation as a perception in God's mind, then even when no human being is observing the moon or any physical object in the universe, that object still exists because God observes it. So I just think that Berkeley takes things to a much deeper and much more satisfactory level than Descartes did.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I think those are good points about the material being somehow prospectively dependent. I would really like to explore more developed Augustinian idealist frameworks and see how well they can accommodate what Berkeley was doing, where they're more rationalist in their understanding. And then, Berkeley's, of course, more empiricist. And the sort of examples you gave do seem, at one level, to lend credence to sort of Berkeley's idealism over and against the Augustinian framework that Descartes inherited. I'm not sold on it, I'm not overly convinced, but I think I see the sort of evidential weight that I'm sympathetic to on the Berkeleyan view.

Michael Egnor:

This has been a absolutely fascinating discussion, Joshua. I thank you very much. And we should talk about more of these things as it's a so fascinating topic. So thank you to all of our listeners at Mind Matters News. I've been speaking with Dr. Joshua Farris, and please join us for future podcasts. Thank you.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News. Explore more at mindmatters.ai, that's mindmatters.ai. Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.