

## The Person as “Immaterial Substance”

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Mike Egnor, and thank you for joining us. I have the pleasure and privilege to chat today with a good friend of mine, Dr. Joshua Farris. Joshua is the Humboldt Experienced Senior Fellow of the Ruhr-Universität Bochum; and he's an International Advisor for Perichoresis, The Theological Journal of Emanuel University; and he's the Associate Editor of Philosophical and Theological Studies for the Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies; and Associate Editor for the European Journal of Religion. He knows a lot about theology and religion, and he has a new book. The book is entitled The Creation of Self, which is an absolutely fascinating topic. Welcome, Joshua, and thank you for joining us.

Joshua Farris:

Thank you for having me. Good to be here.

Michael Egnor:

What is your book about? I'm very, very interested in it.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, good question. Let me give some brief context, and then I can give some more specific context. As the title suggests, The Creation of Self: A Case for the Soul, it's a defense of a view of personhood that requires that, as persons, we are soul substances, we are immaterial substances, something you and I have talked about before, you've talked about on other shows, and we can talk about that again, but it's a defense of the soul, the person as a soul.

In the book, I develop a series of arguments that lend itself to a common view within a minority of literature that's out there in the philosophy of mind that has theistic implications or theological implications. It is the view of theistic dualism that there is this affinity between the fact of our being immaterial substances and the fact of a God, that these are so closely intertwined and intimately related, which harkens back, really, to of course Plato, but also the Augustinian tradition and later traditions leading up to the Cambridge Platonists in different ways, and to Descartes when he talks about the nature of the soul as having this intimate relationship to God.

That intuition that's a part of the broader dualist literature or theistic dualist literature is something that I'm picking up on and developing and making a more specific argument for a particular brand of the soul that I call neo-Cartesianism, so it's broadly within the Cartesian tradition, although it doesn't hold to all the views or the particularities of what Descartes held himself about the nature of science or even the nature of some of the more controversial views about the mind-body relationship, but it is arguably within that tradition, that it gives credence to the nature of first-person authority, first-person authority as having some sort of connection to metaphysics or metaphysical notions, and particularly this broader notion about the soul's relationship to God, which really Descartes is just picking up on Augustine and his tradition that there is this overlap; that when we think about God or when we think about the soul, vice versa, we're thinking about the other.

We're thinking about God when we think about the soul; when we think about the soul, we're thinking about God. In order to understand God, we need to understand something about the soul, which is a tradition that John Calvin and the Reformed theological tradition picks up on as well. In that way, he is

very, very much Augustinian and consistent with the later Cartesian tradition that picks up on this idea. Situated in the broader science and religion discussions, I take up this notion of theistic dualism, which I think has a lot of plausibility, especially right now as consciousness is being re-debated in the wider culture; not just in academia, not just in science, not just in philosophy or theology, but in the wider culture there are these questions, fascinating, important questions about the nature of personhood, consciousness in relation to personhood, and what it is that makes us who we are, what it is that makes me me and you you.

I actually stumbled across your co-host, Robert Marks. I need to actually pick up his book, because it looks like, from a different vantage point, he's making a similar argument on the Non-Computable You. I'm making this argument that there is something not only intuitive, but that can be motivated through more dense, philosophically rigorous arguments, that there is something about the particularity of you that makes you you, and that is not computable. This has obvious ramifications for a wide set of issues right now when we're talking about artificial intelligence and the nature of transhumanism and the more fundamental question about personhood. I make an argument that there is something about the particularity of you that is not captured, is certainly not explained by computation, but even more fundamentally this broader problem of physical or biological parts or physical particles that are comprised in some complex arrangement, but there is something else about you that makes you you that captures the nature of subjectivity.

In short, that's the argument that I'm making in *The Creation of Self*. It's this idea that there is a soul and that persons are souls, and that there is this particularity notion that can't be accounted for, certainly, in physics or in physicalism, which takes it that things are explained by studying the objects of physics or the underlying particles within physics; that there is something else that's needed to explain these things. I set this in the backdrop, in conversation with what I'm calling, and maybe we'll talk about this more, because I think this is really what's undergirding some of the discussions right now as we're thinking about AI and other things, this underlying ontology of naturalism.

There's been some recent developments in naturalism and some interesting developments away from older naturalistic views toward newer and arguably better naturalistic views of persons, but all of them seem to come short of supplying an explanation of the person. It seems that there must be something like a divine agent or an intelligent agent that makes sense of or brings about this person that is you, that seems to be more of a singularity rather than a generable, or explained by generable properties, or is explained by a regular law-like process. This older theistic notion that's embedded in the Augustinian tradition and Cartesian tradition seems to be right, so I fleshed that out in context of these wider naturalistic views that are getting lots of attention right now, not just in academia but in the wider cultural climate as these issues are being picked up in unique and fresh ways.

Michael Egnor:

I think the neo-Cartesian view that you're describing is very appealing and has a great deal to say for it. It raises particular questions, and three of them come to mind immediately. One is, what does that mean regarding the metaphysics of nature? That is, I've always thought that one of the great weaknesses of the Cartesian worldview was the understanding of matter as simple extension in space and doing away with the hylomorphic perspective of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. I always thought that that was a real weakness, and it was one thing that kept me away from the Cartesian view, was the notion that the metaphysics to me didn't seem to be all that strong. The second Cartesian question would be, how does the soul interact with the body? The third question is, how does the soul interact with God, and, conversely, God with the soul? What do you think about those questions?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. I think the metaphysics of nature, neo-Cartesian insight that I'm picking up on actually can fit potentially with a variety of different metaphysical views about nature more broadly. I think you have recent Cartesians who, some would call themselves Cartesians; others would not. They're certainly substance dualists, in that they affirm that there are two distinct property bearers and there are two distinct characteristic features that describe those two property bearers that make them two distinct types of substances, hence the name substance dualism.

I think that more fundamental Cartesian insight is that there is something about the nature of the body that is insufficient for articulating a personhood or getting at a personal identity, so there is some credence given to certainly what would be a sort of epistemic Cartesianism that somebody like Richard Fumerton develops in his... He's a famous epistemologist who develops a sort of Cartesian epistemology or foundationalist epistemology that is very Cartesian, in that we have these foundational ideas that begin with phenomenal consciousness, and by way of phenomenal consciousness we can know certain things about the nature of the body, but it's only mediated knowledge by way of this more fundamental phenomenal knowledge. That's his foundation by which he can arrive at further knowledge about both mental properties, as well as bodily properties or properties of physical substances.

Well, that's just fundamentally Cartesian, and I think there's something about that that's right, and certainly that I pick up on when I develop my argument for the self as being this thing that doesn't find a sufficient designation in bodily properties, or properties at all, but must be rooted in something more fundamental about the particular substance in question. With respect to the metaphysics of nature, I think it could be adaptable to a variety of different metaphysical pictures of nature. What it's not adaptable with, certainly, is naturalistic views of the mind and of agency, and those are the object of criticism in the book, particularly physicalist views, emergentist views, and even more popular right now, or gaining more popularity, is panpsychism.

Michael Egnor:

One of the critiques of the Cartesian position, and I don't mean to make this into a critique, because, again, I think there are quite a few strengths of the Cartesian position, but one of the critiques has historically been that, by separating the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* as being different substances and describing the material world as essentially matter extended in space, one kind of gave rise to modern materialism and naturalism, because, while Descartes obviously, and those who followed in his footsteps, did in fact view mankind as having a dual nature, if you deny the reality of the *res cogitans*, the *res extensa* that you're left with looks an awful lot like the materialist understanding of the world, so it's almost as if Descartes let materialism in the door by his metaphysics. Do you think that's a fair perspective?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Actually, I think you brought this up before, but I haven't heard you frame it quite that way, I don't think, so that's interesting. Yeah, I think later interpreters and those who came after Descartes appropriated him in that way, and certainly there's a complex discussion in modern philosophy following from Spinoza, who takes the same sort of view of substance that Descartes does, but he extends it in a way to... Well, some interpret him as extending it to a naturalistic conclusion that I think later naturalists and physicalists pick up on, and they see the mind as somehow wholly a product of or a feature of material processes. I think his radical reductionism lends itself potentially to that sort of critique, where people at least historically have taken him in that direction. I don't think that it would be fair that he

would affirm that, but I think certainly historically he has been taken that way, and he has opened the sort of Pandora's box, and arguably, many would say, he's created as many problems as he solved.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Right, right, right.

Joshua Farris:

I think that's fair.

Michael Egnor:

Ed Feser, a philosopher, an Aristotelian-Thomistic philosopher, has argued that Descartes kind of created the mind-body problem; that what he proposed wasn't a solution to it, because it was actually quite nicely solved before Descartes, but that Descartes kind of created the problem. I have a lot of sympathy for that perspective, although the one aspect of Cartesian dualism, or two aspects, I think, that really I do find attractive, one is that it's an absolutely beautiful way of understanding near-death experiences.

I mean, let's face it. I mean, if Descartes knew about near-death experiences, he would just say, "I told you so." There certainly seems to be a soul that leaves the body and is a separate substance. The second thing is that I've always found the Aristotelian-Thomistic viewpoint a bit lacking in its explanation, as I understood, of the spiritual aspect of man. I think it's a very powerful explanation of the human soul, except for the spiritual aspects, which I always found difficult to pull out of it, but that may just be me. There are great strengths, but there are also weaknesses. How does the soul interact with the body in the neo-Cartesian view?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, let me answer that. Let me just say briefly, to Ed Feser's critique, I think René Descartes was dealing with the atomists of his day, and he was drawing out what later became known as the hard problem of consciousness, famously brought out by David Chalmers, but I think David Chalmers was really just highlighting a problem that Descartes already picked up on in terms of his irreducible cogito that doesn't seem to be irreducible to physical objects or physical bodies. The solution he provides, David Chalmers and others in his naturalistic or secular culture, don't seem to be much better alternatives to the substance dualism, the kind of radical substance dualism that Descartes advanced.

This does raise a question about the relation of mind-body that you're putting forward. I'm not even sure if it's a problem; it's more of a challenge of being able to conceive of how these two irreducible substances could interact. The famous interaction problem is raised against Descartes' view, and others like it, that there is no conceivable way in which these property bearers could interact at all. That raises other questions down the line, or implications for how it is that they relate one to another.

I think that sort of objection, although it has a long history, a developed history of objecting to Descartes' view and others like it, I think it's an overstated objection. William Hasker, who's a substance dualist himself, but not a Cartesian substance dualist, at least not in any... I mean, he may be, in a very, very deviant sense, a Cartesian. He affirms the kind of emergent dualism that the mind emerges from a sufficiently complex brain and central nervous system. He says that the interaction problem is the most overstated objection to substance dualism in the history of philosophy. I don't know if that's right, but I think it depends on the day and it depends on who I'm reading.

Michael Egnor:

The one way to demonstrate that it's the most overstated problem would be to solve it, and I haven't really seen a good solution to it. A lot of substance dualists say, "Oh, it's overstated." Okay, then how do you solve the interaction problem?

Joshua Farris:

Right, right. I think that's a good point. I think it gets a related problem of, it seems like the interaction problem isn't just a problem for Cartesians; it's a problem for anyone who affirms the irreducibility of these two types of properties, even if one is trying to affirm something like property dualism without substance dualism.

Michael Egnor:

Right, right. Right, exactly.

Joshua Farris:

You're still going to have that interaction problem. You're still going to have to supply some sort of explanatory bridge between the two. Most Cartesians today, many of them would just say, "Well, there's just a singular relation that just exists. God sets up the interaction between the two substances, and He..." Yeah.

Michael Egnor:

That's fine, and that may very well be true, but it's kind of unsatisfying. You'd like to see the interaction problem solved in a natural way. I don't mean natural without God, but I mean in a way that just fits into nature like a puzzle piece, rather than just God having to come in and do it. The one way I've heard the interaction problem solved, that I thought was very interesting and satisfactory, was just to say that the interaction between the soul and the body is a matter of formal cause, not a matter of efficient cause. That is, it's not a matter of soul billiard balls bumping into body billiard balls; it's formal cause, and formal cause can involve causation with immaterial things and material things. That's what a form is is an immaterial thing. I found that actually a rather satisfactory way of resolving the interaction problem. The problem with that is that you have to resort to hylomorphism to solve it, and having to resort to hylomorphism sort of takes you out of the Cartesian metaphysical world.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, possibly. Possibly. Yeah, yeah. I think this has been the objection before. When it comes to causation, I'm not sure either way, but you could be right. You could be right about hylomorphism. I haven't been convinced yet, but, again, I'm also not up on my causation literature. I'm not an expert on causation.

Michael Egnor:

There's an analogy in chemistry to this that I've always found very, very compelling and very fascinating. It's the idea of chirality, the idea that there are molecules in the chemical world that are mirror images of one another, so they're identical in every respect, except one is the other in a mirror, and their physical properties can be dramatically different. I can't think of the name of them off the top of my head, but there are some molecules that are perfectly harmless or even beneficial substances, nutrients, in one mirror image, and in the other mirror image, they're poison. They'll kill you. There is no material

difference between the two molecules, as they're made of the same atoms and they're connected the same way, but they have different forms. They're mirror forms. Clearly, there's an immaterial formal causation going on there that makes one arrangement of matter beneficial, the other arrangement of matter poisonous, and you could see that formal causation is a way of linking immaterial things and material things, but, again, once you start talking formal causation, you're really into Aristotle's world.

Joshua Farris:

Couldn't you affirm something like Augustine? I mean, Augustine, it's been argued that when it comes to material nature... Now, I'm stretching myself here a bit, but, I mean, some have called Augustine a hylomorphist as well when it comes to his metaphysics of nature. Now, it's not worked out the way that it is with Thomas Aquinas, but he certainly seems to describe these sorts of ideas as having some sort of potency that gives rise to some sort of formal organization that would only be made sense of by way of this formal idea that minds give to nature, so some Augustinian idealists have affirmed this view that there is some sort of formal causation, but it reduces to the mind, or the mind and its ideas. Would that be satisfactory?

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, sure. Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah. In fact, I think the idealist view in general has a whole lot to say for it. I think it's a fascinating view. My metaphysical beef with Descartes is just his general abandonment of hylomorphism. I think I said it opens the door to a kind of crude materialism, which obviously wasn't Descartes' intention, but it hasn't had good consequences.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I think that's right. Yeah. Actually, I would say, this is getting into more of technical interpretation of Descartes. There was an article about interpreting his letters back and forth with the Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, right?

Michael Egnor:

Yeah.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. His famous letters back and forth, he actually does affirm hylomorphism. He qualifies it quite significantly when he's talking about nature with her and bodies. He does say, "I am a hylomorphist," in that letter, but he will say, "But I'm not a hylomorphist in the way that Aristotle was." He's distancing himself from the whole Aristotelian tradition and trying to say something that might be more akin... although it's not clear in his more technical writings. Maybe he's being a bit cagey there, because there are political things at stake, obviously, in his discussions there, but he does affirm hylomorphism in various places, in that one in particular when he's talking to the Princess. Maybe it's just a political move, but I'm more sympathetic to the idea that he's actually trying to salvage something in hylomorphism to make sense of his metaphysics of nature, but it might be made better sense of by some sort of Augustinian idealism or Berkeleyan idealism to make sense of the formal relationship between souls and bodies.

Michael Egnor:

Sure, sure. Well, Joshua, I thank you so much. That's absolutely fascinating. We will continue our discussion in the next podcast. Thanks to all of our listeners, and please stay with us for our next podcast. This is Mike Egnor for Mind Matters News.

Announcer:

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