

What Makes Humans Unique?

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep257>

Michael Egnor:

Hi. This is Mike Egnor. I have the pleasure of having a discussion with Dr. Joshua Farris. Dr. Farris is the Humboldt Experience Scholar Fellow at Ruhr University in Bochum in Germany. Dr. Farris and I on a previous podcast were talking about neo-Cartesianism and about his new book, *The Creation of Self*, which sounds absolutely fascinating. Joshua, you had mentioned earlier that the neo-Cartesian viewpoint helps us to understand better the relationship between the human soul and God. How does that work?

Joshua Farris:

I think there's a few different ways you can come at this question. I was recently working on an entry on theological anthropology for an encyclopedia, and this sort of question has a sort of wide and diverse complex set of answers to it. I think going back to Thomas Aquinas and his definition of human nature as being kind of the Boethian definition of a rational animal, we could say that in virtue of what some theologians in history, like Maximus, would call this sort of ECK-type relationship between the soul as a rational being and the world as rationally structured by God, that it's rationality that links us back to God. But I think there's something maybe even more mysterious, maybe in one sense, more transcendent. Certainly there's been different transcendent proposals within theology that have tried to make sense of this connection between God and humans that you find in the Eastern tradition as well as in a different way in the Augustinian tradition, that it's the soul's transcendence that is more mysterious, that links us to God, that we find in people like John Calvin.

We find different permutations of this in the Cambridge Platonist literature, where emotion is a strong feature that connects humans to God, and emotions are basically, well, that's an immaterial property of the soul, and it's something that links us to God. In a later history, there's been further developments of imagination as being the prime candidate that defines the soul and links us to God. Recent history, there's been a lot of literature that's been put out on the nature of subjectivity, and I think certainly since the time of the existentialist following Kant and Kant's argument for the soul as being this transcendental precondition that the existentialists later pick up on and the phenomenologists pick up on, there's been a recent resourcing of both phenomenologists and the existentialists in trying to make sense of this notion of subjectivity that seems to be difficult to capture either in materialistic ways, in the language of science, and even in the language of analytic philosophy with its precision on objective thinking, means-to-end thinking, what Stephen Priest calls conditioned ways of approaching the subject.

So there's been a recent plethora of knowledge that's been coming out trying to capture this notion of subjectivity by using existential philosophy, phenomenology. I think something like the notion of subjectivity, at least I gesture in this direction in the book, *The Creation of Self*, is what gets us closer to this link between God and humanity. It may be the *Imago Dei*, or it may be what's fundamentally undergirding, image bearers of God, but this notion of subjectivity that we are created entities, created in the image of God, that defies any sort of objective analysis and can't be brought about through these generalizable processes, but instead must be created directly and immediately by an intelligent being.

I think that gets us closer to the heart of what's going on when we think about the *Imago Dei*. And this is something that Augustine, John Calvin, and Descartes really bring out in their understanding of the *Imago Dei*. Descartes talks about the *Imago Dei* as this catalytic idea, this sort of stationary idea that's imprinted on the soul, that's not something that is certainly not materialistic, it's not changeable, but it's

something that is foundational to who we are. It's just this stationary idea that's fixed in the very mind of man, that we can actually, through the light of God, we can have access to it. By having access to it, we are directly pointed to our Creator.

Michael Egnor:

Of course, traditional Thomistic understanding of the human person is the Aristotelian one, that we are rational animals, and that animality involves the inability to reason, that is that the animals, that non-human animals, lack this capacity for reason. I do think one can draw a connection between the capacity for reason, the capacity to think abstractly, to think in terms of universals rather than particulars, and the image of God. It is God is a Spirit, and He does not need eyes or ears or a sense of touch to know things. And we, to some extent, are the same way in that we can understand concepts that don't have a physical instantiation. I think even just in the traditional Aristotelian Thomistic way of understanding man, I think you can get to the image of God, at least in that sense. You had mentioned imagination and emotion and subjectivity as reflections of the image of God in man, but don't animals also have those things? I mean, they certainly have emotions, and I don't doubt that they have imagination, and subjectivity is a more difficult question, but do animals share any of these images?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I think they have emotions. I think the Cambridge Platonists are talking about a more refined notion of emotion that leads us to transcendentals. And I'm not sure that they have that, they don't have the ability to cognize transcendentals, but I think imagination is a little trickier. The gentleman that has really in recent years put forward this idea, and he's drawn to Platonism, but he's also tying it in with recent conceptions of... Recent literature in art and poetry is Douglas Hedley, where he argues that imagination is the primary attribute that distinguishes humans from animals.

Michael Egnor:

What does he mean by imagination?

Joshua Farris:

I think he's describing it as something that, it's the capacity or the power of the soul to create new things. He has in mind things like, well, things like humor for one, which Roger Scruton brings up. I guess many would argue that animals don't have the capacity to laugh because they don't get humor, they don't get the complexities of humor. But the same goes with poetry. We don't have animals writing poetry or even gesturing toward poetry or gesturing toward fictional stories. They're not able to do that. They don't have that kind of consciousness that gives them sort of imaginistic powers. So he distinguishes imagination in that way, that there are these different features of humanity, that these creative capacities, that really set them apart. So he's sort of pushing against the sort of Boethian definition of a rational animal, that rationality is insufficient for accounting for the Imago Dei, something more like the imaginative capacity of humans to create new things.

Michael Egnor:

But it would seem that there are two different definitions of imagination, and I think the word is used in several ways, but that boils down to two. One is that sort of traditional Aristotelian way of understanding that imagination is simply the formation of an image based on a sense perception. That is, I looked at an apple, and then I can after that conjure an image of an apple in my mind, or I can

conjure the sound of a song that I like in my mind. Aristotle argued that animals have that kind of imagination. They can conjure an image of a piece of food or an image of an owner in their mind.

Then the other kind of imagination would be the ability to create, the ability to think abstractly, and to do things that go beyond the concrete particular world. And I think that really is definitely a characteristic of the human mind that animals don't share, but it's a different thing. It's not imagination in the Aristotelian sense. It's not just making an image in your head, it's thinking abstractly about things and creating things that didn't exist before and maybe creating things that never will have a physical existence.

Joshua Farris:

I think that's his definition. He explicitly defines imagination in this way, that there is a link between the classical transcendentals of beauty, goodness, and truth, all of which are viewed as divine attributes and connect us to God, and it's through this imaginative capacity that we actually connect with God. So he traces this out in various ways in history. So I think, yeah, that's right. That's right. He has a more refined conception of imagination than this sort of Aristotelian conception.

Michael Egnor:

Very interesting. And you had mentioned that obviously the relationship between God and man goes in both directions. The neo-Cartesian way of understanding the soul helps us in understanding how man can connect to God. Does it help us in understanding how God connects to man?

Joshua Farris:

I think only insofar as it provides, say, a place, an immaterial place by which we interact with God, by which God interacts with us. In the Platonic tradition, there's the transcendentals. God interacts with us through the transcendentals or through the Platonic heaven that we have access to by way of this Imago Dei, whatever the Imago Dei is, this stationary idea that provides a foundational necessary link between us and God. Yeah, insofar as it provides a kind of a place used more in a subjective sense rather than this sort of objective sense or even physical sense, and so far as it provides a place for us to meet, I think that's kind of the way that at least the Platonic tradition is using this notion, God interacts with us in that way through that means or through that place.

Michael Egnor:

We mentioned before that there recently has been a bit of a shift in the naturalist world, that naturalists are starting to look at things in a somewhat different way, or at least people are looking at things in a different way that aren't the more traditional naturalism that we've had over the past couple of centuries. How is the naturalist perspective changing? And why is it changing?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, yeah. I think this is a really interesting question, and it gets at the heart of some of the cultural discussions right now. There's a couple different ways it's changing. In the history of philosophy, there was obviously, not to rehash too much, but in this context, I think this is important and interesting. In the history of philosophy, in recent analytic philosophy in the mid 1900s, we're beginning to see this sort of shift away from logical positivism and logical behaviorism as adequate ways of making sense of consciousness. And then there's this move toward more identity or reductionistic views of consciousness, trying to make sense of consciousness by way of not just linguistically making sense of it,

but actually providing some sort of ontological reduction that would get rid of the need for some sort of bridge between these two distinct types of properties: mental properties and physical properties.

So you had the hard problem of consciousness come on the scene with David Chalmers, who moves in this more dualistic, naturalistic, dualistic direction that gives credence to the fact that there is this radical distinction between qualitative experience and quantitative measurement of physical objects in the world that we can study through science and give mathematical equations to, or mathematical numbers to, and we can quantify these sorts of things. In recent history, you have various secularist views of consciousness on offer that interact with or overlap with a broader explanation for the origins of the universe, and what's really become quite popular right now is what's called secular panpsychism. Panpsychism is the view that arguably takes seriously the mind, that these mind properties, these qualitative properties of phenomenal experience are real, and that they are irreducible properties to physical things, that they cannot be reduced. They are not identical, so it arguably takes seriously the mind.

What it doesn't do is it doesn't take the further move to affirming something like substantial dualism or anything that's reminiscent of Descartes. In fact, many times he's not even mentioned in the discussion anymore, ironically, although he probably should be. He's in the background there. But that has become really popularized through the likes of people like David Chalmers, Thomas Nagle, and more recently, Philip Goff, who's trying to advance an argument of the origins of the universe by taking seriously the mind and taking seriously fine-tuning of the world without invoking design.

Michael Egnor:

They will do anything to avoid design.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. It's fascinating, and these are becoming really popular and getting lots of attention. So that's one way.

Michael Egnor:

I look upon panpsychism... First of all, it's a very interesting way to look at the world, and it certainly, I think, is heading down the right track in that if one were a completely neutral observer, just looking at nature, looking at physics and chemistry and all the things going on in nature, the one thing you have to say, the most fundamental thing you have to say is that this is shot through with mind. That is that there's an overwhelming presence of some kind of mind in this process. And it's kind of interesting that, in fact, the one aspect of ourselves with which we have a direct connection rather than an indirect connection is our own mind. That is, we experience our mind; we rely on our senses to experience our body, to feel pain, to feel touch, to see our body, and so on, but we don't need senses to know our mind. We have a mind.

It's actually us, in a sense. So in some way, mind is more fundamental than matter, and I think the panpsychists see that. So they try to put mind at the core of things, but, of course, they leave out so much. They leave out God; they leave out a deeper understanding. I think the biggest critique that one can make of panpsychism is that you have to define what the threshold is for mind. Does every electron have a mind? And do quarks within the electron have independent minds? Are there discussions among the quarks that determine what the electron does? Where does the mind cut off? How subatomic do you have to get before you don't have a mind? And I don't think that's a question panpsychists could answer.

Joshua Farris:

No, I think you're right. I think they don't give an answer. They just presume it as fact. And if it is fact, then it makes sense of the fine-tuning problem without invoking an intelligent designer or... Well, I guess it depends on how we're defining intelligence and the properties that we ascribe to it. Certainly not a personalized designer, certainly not theism. At least the secular versions on offer that are trying to get away from any sort of design consequence are trying... Well, they would say, Philip Goff would say at the most fundamental level of physical particles, there are physical particles and there are minds or mindlets of some sort that are these mind potencies that are mind-like, at least like our minds, but they're certainly not the same sort of sophistication of our minds.

So this makes sense of fine-tuning without invoking some sort of underlying mind, as in... So these secularists are even distinguishing themselves from a view that is a sort of, you might call it a sort of theism, although it's a kind of impersonalized theism, and that is Bernardo Kastrup's view, which is a kind of analytic... Well, he calls it analytic idealism, but there is this undergirding metaphysical reality of the mind that makes sense of the universe. What these naturalist secularists are doing, they're arguing something different even from Bernardo's view, which I think, ironically, Bernardo's view is actually closer to theism in some ways than they are, because they're saying at the most fundamental level, there are these, along with someone like Bertrand Russell, they're saying that there are these physical properties as well as mental properties that exist, and they're just brutes, and they kind of get cagey when you start asking them or pressing them about, well, what about the contingency of those minds? Or even our minds that are new, novel, sui generis as philosophers would say, they are contingent consciousnesses. How do you make sense of that?

I think Bernardo Kastrup has a better answer for that. Theists have a better answer. But many of these naturalists don't give an answer, they just accept it as a brute contingent that needs no further explanation. I think that's deeply unsatisfying, and that's one of the biggest problems with their views. I think there's other problems with having these distinct types of properties without a distinct types of substance. I think their view actually lends itself to some sort of substance dualism. But the even more fundamental problem is how do they make sense of these brute consciousnesses that come into existence out of nowhere? What's the explanation? I think they just don't have an explanation. They don't press any further beyond to provide some sort of hypothesis that would explain those contingencies in the world.

Michael Egnor:

You really get the sense that naturalists are sort of groping in the dark, that they have these intuitions of the truth. In the past, just a strict materialism. And even now, there's a lot of materialism, particularly eliminative materialism out there in the naturalist world, but some are moving away from it. They're still groping in the dark, and they kind of recognize that mind is such a fundamental thing, that you can't just explain it away. So now they're going to panpsychism. Maybe they'll get to theism eventually.

I want to thank you, Joshua. It's been wonderful speaking with you, and please stay tuned for our next podcast, and thank you for joining us at Mind Matters News.

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.