

## A Brief History of the Soul

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep269>

Pat Flynn:

Okay, everybody, welcome to the podcast. My name is Pat Flynn, I am the host of Philosophy for the People, and today we are going to discuss substance dualism. I have two experts, experts indeed, with me, Dr. Stewart Goetz, and Dr. Charles, I'm sorry, I'm going to mispronounce it right away after you just told me how.

Charles Taliaferro:

Oliver with a T, Toliver in this country, but as I say internationally, I go by Taliaferro.

Pat Flynn:

Okay. Yeah. Well, thank you for the assistance. It is wonderful to be joined by the two of you. Like I said, I've been familiar with your work for a while. This is the first opportunity I've had to have a conversation with you. You both contributed together to a recent volume called Minding the Brain, and your contribution is on substance dualism. So I'm excited to explore this with you, to give a brief history of the soul, to explain what substance dualism is, look at some of the motivations for it, consider some of the objections against it, and whatever else comes up along the way. I'm sure we'll have a good time. So thank you both for joining me.

Stewart Goetz:

Thank you.

Pat Flynn:

So before we get into it, I'm sure it would be helpful to have just a brief introduction by way of biography for both of you. So Stewart, if you wouldn't mind, let's begin with you. I'd love to hear just how you got into philosophy in general, and specifically what brought you to philosophy of mind.

Stewart Goetz:

Yeah. Like many, I probably got initially interested in philosophy through philosophy of religion, many, many, too many years ago now, I had a tutor actually, that convinced me one couldn't do a good philosophy of religion without doing philosophy of mind, and what's called philosophy of action, which is questions about freedom, determinism. And rightly or wrongly, I believed him, and I got very interested in philosophy of mind and questions, freedom of the will. And I ended up pretty much focusing on those issues and only in recent years have gone back more towards philosophy of religion. So it was largely a tutor who had a huge impact on me and persuaded me that I needed to do philosophy of mind and philosophy of action in order to do good philosophy of religion.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. Well, great. Sometimes you hear that when it comes to philosophy, to ask one question is ultimately to ask all the questions.

Stewart Goetz:

That's right.

Pat Flynn:

You can't help but hop from one subject area to another, so great. Very good. Charles, how about you?

Charles Taliaferro:

Well, I'll make this a little personal because the reason I got into philosophy was I had three really dominating older brothers who constantly exploited and what I found in philosophy, as a teenager reading Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, a classic in the mid-twentieth century for beginners, was a context in which you had a non-sarcastic, non-big brother exchange where people respected each other's views, the reasons for why they held them, and so on. So I got into philosophy as a refuge for what I thought was unfair domination and so on.

The reason why I got into philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion was largely late high school, early college, and then through my 36 years of teaching in St. Olaf, and before that at Notre Dame and elsewhere, is I found all the central issues that really mattered to me about right, wrong, the existence of the divine, the transcendent, whether it makes sense to think about God, the relationship with God, and so on. And then also environmental concerns, I taught it, and published in environmental ethics for at least 20 years or so. So my interest in ethics, the transcendent, and really the big questions is what really kept me and keeps me in philosophy.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. Well, that's wonderful. And yes, God and soul are certainly very big important questions, ones that I try to think a lot about myself. So where I would like to begin with this conversation is actually following the structure of your article, you do a great job in this article giving a brief history of the soul. And I know you two have actually both co-authored another book called *The Brief History of the Soul*. I think this would be a good starting point, if one of you wouldn't mind taking a lead on this, obviously this will be the truncated version, but I think it would be helpful for the listeners to have this brief history of how thinking about the soul has developed through the history of philosophy, and then at some point that'll, of course, bring us to the contemporary debate between dualists and non-dualists. So yeah, how's that sound?

Stewart Goetz:

Well, in terms of just ordinary people, I think Charles would agree with me here that most people, if not all, in some sense, have a very basic belief, in a way, that we are things or substances that are separate from our physical bodies, and what we know of, at least in the Western tradition, that some of the first people really to start and think about this, philosophize about this really universal belief were the Greeks. And we find that the first person of whose work we have a lot, seemingly, is Plato, and Plato's student, Aristotle, also contributed to work on the soul.

And when Christianity comes on the scene, you get Christians who are, on our telling of the story, I think, are already believers in the soul, but they access the Greek thought about the soul in order to try and explicate their own views. And in the tradition, the Christian tradition, you'll have largely followers of Plato, the Platonic line of thought, which largely comes down, I think, through Augustine, and Descartes is a general but fair way to put it. And then the Aristotelian tradition, which it's a primary spokesman, probably in the Christian tradition, is Aquinas.

When you get to Descartes, you have somebody who, although he tells us, I believe the beginning of the meditations, he is going to basically use the word mind and soul synonymously, you get this tradition

that starts to think of the mind instead of the soul. Descartes makes a major move intellectually, I think. Up until Descartes, most people talked about the soul, took it to be something that not only was separate from the physical body, but also gave life to it. And Descartes says, "No, we should start to think of the body as a machine, is not something that is given its life through the soul."

And so coming out of Descartes, he breaks that connection between the soul and the life-giving power that the soul bestows on the body, and I think people start thinking in terms of the mind more than the soul. And it's only, I don't know, Charles, I think fairly recently, where we're seeing a resurgence among philosophers and theologians who want to talk about the soul and not think of it so much as something distinct from the mind, but it just is the mind, which Descartes actually said.

And just one little note here in the Christian tradition, particularly among New Testament, biblical people, scholars, they'll constantly, repeatedly, over and over again, they'll ascribe to the idea of the soul to Plato and they'll say it's a Platonic idea, and there's a move among biblical people to say that, "No, this is too much of a Greek idea and we want to return to a more Hebrew, monistic type view of the self, which doesn't include a separable soul." And this is really a bunch of... I better be careful here, what I say. This just isn't true. The idea of the soul is universal in nature. Plato didn't invent the idea of the soul. It is not a Greek idea. He philosophized about the soul and the Christian tradition accessed his thought about it. But this idea among biblical scholars that the soul is a Greek idea is thoroughly fallacious.

Charles Taliaferro:

Yeah, I agree completely with what Stewart is saying, that people make the mistake of thinking that it was Descartes or Plato who began with the concept of mind or soul or substance dualism. But really, it's been supposed that, certainly in Egypt and China and India and Sanskrit, you have a steady stream of at least an intuitive understanding of persons as something of more than the body. And in fact, the ritual practices of burying people with grave goods and so on suggest that even in Neanderthal times, there was the notion of the person as somehow more than their biological bodies. So I would agree with all that.

I think what might be emphasized is, and that Descartes brings out, and Augustine as well, is that substance dualism, and both in terms of common sense and in its philosophical genre, does gain a lot of momentum from our sense of ourselves, our self-awareness, as being primitive or basic. It might, for young children and infants, be something that develops over time, but that you have a primary access to knowledge of who you are as an enduring subject over time. And as in the modern area, which we'll get to, which has a primacy to mind independent physical things, but really the dualist tradition is something that is anchored in a sense of self-awareness that each of us has.

Also, we might note that the word dualism is a very recent term. It was first introduced in the 19th century to describe Zoroastrianism, which has a good God and a bad God. So Plato and Descartes, Augustine, and so on, none of them said, "We're dualists." And in a way, the word dualism seems a little awkward in the sense it sounds like there are just two things, whereas really, so many thinkers, Plato for example, believed in a myriad, a plentitude of kinds of things, and so on.

So dualism is, again, it also, as a term, it suggests a bifurcation that is to talk with us, is to talk with our bodies that we are controlling and so on. Whereas historically, whether for Plato, Augustine, this great tradition, there's an understanding, certainly Descartes held this, that you weren't in your body like a captain is in a ship. That is to see a person who's functioning properly and so on is to actually not see just a machine that a ghost is controlling, but to see an organically unified whole, that's functioning as a whole, but it does involve the mind or soul as well as bodily life.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, that's really helpful and very clarifying, and I like the way that the two of you have outlined this so far. If I can just ask a few more questions just to help gain further clarity before we move specifically to considering motivations for substance dualism and common objections. When I think of, oftentimes Aristotle and Plato are pitted against each other, or the Platonic tradition, and the tradition that, of course, I'm most familiar with, which is Aquinas's. And this itself is a part of the debate, is hylomorphism a form of dualism, or is it not? And maybe we can get into that a little bit. But when I think of Aristotle, he's got this wider metaphysical system of hylomorphism, matter-formism, right? And he's not really interested in debates in philosophy of mind that we're having, he's interested in how do we make sense of change? And stuff like that.

And then he offers his different principles of how we make sense, of how things remain the same, even though they undergo contingent modifications, and stuff like that. And then of course, Aquinas adopts that and synthesizes it with Christian thought and offers different motivations for it, and even goes beyond Aristotle and argues that there's an aspect of us concerning intellect specifically that actually would not suffer from decomposition like the rest of our body would. So he thinks it can be extended to the immortality of the human person philosophically as well. I guess that'd be my first question for the two of you. Where does hylomorphism fall for both of you? Do you see Aristotle and Aquinas being dualists? Or do you not classify them as dualists? Stewart, maybe we'll start with you. It's a tough question. I know. No matter where you land on this, you're going to get people objecting, so I didn't set you up for an easy one there.

Stewart Goetz:

I will make no friends in answering this question, but make many enemies. I would be inclined to, myself, think of Aquinas as what we would today call a substance dualist, although I'm going to get vehement protests in opposition to that. But it seems to me that he does recognize the existence of the soul after death and has the idea of the resurrection of the body, and so there's some kind of, I think, intermediate state there. And it's pretty simple terms here, Pat, I just think that that would be the idea of a soul. But you're going to have people like Eleonore Stump that'll just say, "No, no, no, no, it's not." But those are just very technical debates. For my purposes, I would lump Aquinas in with substance dualists.

Charles Taliaferro:

Yeah, I'm agreeing with Stewart, especially when Aquinas thinks of the soul as enduring the decomposition of the body. However, Aquinas sometimes, I think he does say, "The soul is not myself." However, it is the conduit or the receptor of personal identity is what makes you self-same and to be resurrected and the like. But Aristotle, you're right, he wasn't primarily concerned with philosophy of religion and the like. He does have a notion, though, of the intellect, which does admit of some kind of a hint or suggestion of something indestructible. But you do see historically among Aristotelians, especially among the Arabs and, well, Persians or Iranians, thinkers, al-Farabi, Avicenna, and so on, for those heavily influenced by Aristotle, there is a real hesitancy about affirming the individual identity of persons after death.

Now, in Islam, Sunni and Shi'a, they do believe in an individual dynamic after life and the like, but the Aristotelian framework of hylomorphism does challenge that. Now, I would say today some hylomorphists, self-described, are prepared to consider themselves dualists, like J.P. Moreland, for example, subscribes to a version of hylomorphism. My own inclination is to think that he's not necessarily wrong. I'm not Humpty Dumpty, you control the meaning of the words, but I do think that it

is perhaps one of the way Moreland, and some other contemporary Thomists, are trying to insist on the integrity of the mind-body relationship, that it's not this radical bifurcation, but we should treat each other in a holistic way. But fundamentally, I'm with Stew, and so we may be public enemy number one and two.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. Well, you might be able to count me as number three there because I'm inclined to go with you. I think one of the important things to note here is, yes, for Aquinas the soul is the form of the body, it's that organizing principle. And sometimes when people think of substance dualism, and the way you describe Descartes' position, at least the popular understanding of it is not that, right? It is still the ghost in the machine idea, like we have two fundamentally different things, and one inhabits and controls the other, but there's not that deeper unity for Aquinas' theory, as I understand it, has really distinct principles, but these principles are deeply interpenetrating and irreducible to one another.

But I'm with you in the sense that when I think about it, and many people following Aquinas do classify it as dualism, and I'm glad you brought up Dr. Moreland. He, of course, is a contributor to the Mind in the Brain Volume, and I just got his other new one on the substance of consciousness, which is very good as well. So, sorry, a technical in the weeds dispute there, but I think it's important for this conversation because whatever we say going forward, I guess I'm curious how much of the motivations for substance dualism you think would apply to thinkers in the broadly Aristotelian camp, if that makes sense.

Stewart Goetz:

Yeah. Well, just to finish up, when I try to think about this stuff, if you look at it from the perspective of a naturalist, in today's terms an atheist, if they were to look at Thomism, it seems to me they would regard this debate between Thomas and Descartes or whatever, they would buy very much this internal dispute that people on the outside, I think, would clearly see Thomism here, Aquinas as dualistic in nature. So it's an intramural debate at that point to them, and they would be opposed to both views because there's something that survives the death of the body, and that's dualism to these people.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah.

Announcer:

That's all we have time for today. Join us next time as we continue our discussion with Pat, Stew, and Charles. Thanks for listening, and until then, be of good cheer.

This has been Mind Matters News, explore more at [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). That's [mindmatters.ai](http://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.