

# Beyond the Physical: Embracing an Idealistic Worldview

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep277>

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your non-robotic co-host, Robert J. Marks, and I'm joined by my CAPTCHA-passing co-host. All of these CAPTCHA tests, he passes, and he does it seamlessly.

Brian Krouse:

With flying colors.

Robert J. Marks:

It's really amazing to watch him. Brian Krouse. We have been talking to Dr. Doug Axe at Biola University about idealism. It's a chapter in the new book *Minding the Brain*, and that was co-edited by Brian Angus Menuge and me, and is available at [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). You're supposed to mention the website more than once, so [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). And we're going to continue our dialogue about idealism. And Brian, why don't you start things off with the inquisition of Dr. Axe.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, okay. All right. So super brief recap. We talked so far in previous episodes about some of the problems that there are with physicalism and also with dualism that come about for a variety of reasons, but including some of the findings of modern physics that don't sit that well with this metaphysical picture of the world of physical reality is this external particle-like, made of building blocks thing that makes up the real world and how idealism presents a different picture.

And on the end of our last episode, you were unpacking a bit about what the metaphysical pieces of the idealistic world... on idealism, what does it look like for me to have an idea of throwing the ball, throwing the ball, and how that passes through from my mind to this equation that's in the mind of God and so forth. So that is all very interesting. Maybe one more question on that that I have. Okay, so some of the medical physical pieces we have are of course we have God and his mind and the equation that represents the world that exists in God's mind. And then separately we have our own minds, and a mind per human, maybe per animal. In a dualist world, I could kind of place where those minds exist because typically, you're a mind-body unity of some sort, and you have a location within physical space. But where exactly on the idealistic picture do I conceive of all these minds existing?

Doug Axe:

Yeah, it's a good question. I think, though, it is a question that has a residual of physicalism in it, in that when we ask where, we're picturing "tell me longitude, latitude, altitude." So we're picturing something that's part of the physical structure and trying to say where in that... what I'm claiming, what the idealist would claim, is a mathematical structure... Where in that mathematical structure is the mind of me or you or anyone else? And I think the where question is probably retaining a residual of the view that I'm saying is not the correct view and that you're asking me for coordinates maybe.

Brian Krouse:

Possibly, yeah. Yeah.

Doug Axe:

Yeah. And that's-

Brian Krouse:

Seems to be some sense in which our minds are not in God. We're apart from God. And the thoughts of God are in God in some sense, and our thoughts are in our minds in some sense, but my thoughts are not in God in that same sense.

Doug Axe:

Yeah, it might clarify things just to simply reiterate that the picture that I'm espousing, the picture that I'm trying to describe, has reality consisting of thinkers and their thoughts. We could call them minds or for humans, mind, soul, spirits. So there's a whole lot to us other than just thinking. And God is the supreme thinker. So if we say that those things exist and that God is the only thinker who can produce, who can create minds... And this could take us off in a direction of artificial intelligence and all that, but I don't know that we have time for that.

If we say that God is the only thinker who's capable of creating minds, and the human minds that he's created are capable of creating thoughts, but nothing else, there's nothing else that a human can create, and that the human minds are not God, they're not God's mind, I don't think we have to worry about giving XY coordinates. I think we have a system here where if we say God can create human minds and he sees absolutely everything about them, he knows everything about that's going on in my thinking, he knows my thoughts before I think them, and he's capable of carrying out in real time this immensely complex mathematical calculation that is the physical universe, and he's capable of interacting directly with human minds to give us perceptions and to read our minds and know what needs to be pushed back into the mathematical calculation, I think the where question sort of dissolves away. Or at least I don't see something that's problematic that's left out of that.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, if I could jump in, I believe that both in terms of the theory of the Big Bang and in scripture, that before the creation of the Big Bang, there was no time. Now that's mind-blowing, imagining something without time. There is no space. And indeed, if God did create the universe, he exists outside of time and space. That being the case also, we're limited to three spatial dimensions. There's really no reason that... In string theory, I believe, they can go up to tens, twenties, thirties, dimensions. I forget the exact number, but they go up to a number of dimensions that they say exist here in our world that they're actually in strings, and they're all compactified and stuff. So again, we're kind of numbed by our familiarity of... but in a different way, numbed by our familiarity with things existing in space and time. I don't think that God and his creation exists in space and time, and it's just mind-blowing to consider something outside of space and time. But indeed, if that's the case, then talking about a coordinate is without meaning.

Doug Axe:

Right.

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, that's really interesting. Well, okay, so let's take a slightly different, maybe just an application of some of these ideas. Let's go into some of that. So one direction we could think about application is how

would being an idealist and a scientist in some field... Pick one, whether you're doing math, physics, computer science, neuroscience. How would the idealist perspective, do you think, impact the way you did your work? Or would it? Is it more just kind of an interpretive thing in the background?

Doug Axe:

So maybe we could picture a chemist or someone who's soldiering along in their career, and then they at some point become an idealist on Saturday. And when they go back into the lab on Monday, does their work look different? Is that kind of the...

Brian Krouse:

Yes. Yes. Either does their work itself look different or the way they're conceiving of their work? That would also be interesting.

Doug Axe:

Granted, you're going to spend a lot of time scratching your head on Saturday. But if you resolve it by Sunday and you go to church-

Brian Krouse:

You probably shouldn't tell all your friends right away on Monday.

Doug Axe:

Once you get over the, wait, is this weird? I thought it was weird when I first heard about it. And the more I think about it, the less weird it becomes, has been my experience. There are a few sort of spiritual things that I think it affects, but I don't think it would affect doing your chemistry or your physics or your biology or your astrophysics at all. A few more philosophical things that I would say is if on Friday you thought... But here you would've been a materialist or a physicalist on Friday. If on Friday you thought that the physical universe is the base reality, and maybe you're a particle physicist and you're setting up to do some experiments with an accelerator, doing something looking at subatomic particles.

If on Friday you thought that was the base reality, that ultimately everything boils down to strings or quarks, on Monday, once you've made this transition, you're going to scratch your head a lot and decide, "Oh, I'm not sure what I'm trying to study so hard here is the base reality. It's not that it's not real, it's that it's not the point anymore." So there could be that sort of, "Why was I doing what I was doing? And maybe I have a different view of the value of what I was doing." And I'm not saying that there isn't value to any of these scientific disciplines, but if you're drilling in on particle physics, thinking that you're finding the essence of reality, I think you're mistaken. And I think if you became an idealist, you would think likewise.

Brian Krouse:

Do you think it would change the expectations of what you might be looking for, especially at that quantum level? Well, you gave an example of, what was it? David Bohm I think was motivated to try to reconcile quantum mechanics with a more classical view.

Doug Axe:

Yeah, he tried to come up with a... Are you familiar with him, Bob? Did you ever read Dave Bohm?

Robert J. Marks:

No.

Doug Axe:

He tried to come up with a deterministic replacement for quantum mechanics, and it didn't succeed. But I think his motivation was, "This is so weird. I don't want physics to look like this. So help me think of a version of physics where there really are... Wave things consist of particles, and there's something that explains it deterministically." So I think that if we go to this hypothetical scientist who's become, over the weekend, an idealist, and maybe they started off as a physicalist last week and now this week they go to work on Monday and everything looks different, it is not that they would expect to find something different in their experiments, I think. Rather, they would have a different interpretation of the significance of their whole field with respect to the sum total of all of reality.

Because I imagine many materialist physicists... If you're a particle physicist and you're a materialist atheist, you think you're studying the most fundamental things that exist. You think that your field is defining reality and that everything ultimately is described by what your field describes. And if that person had this sort of transition over the weekend, on Monday, they go into work, he or she goes into work, and thinks, "Oh, particle physics is not... It's not going to answer the question of what is the base reality." It's an important part of a mathematical structure that has a role in God's plan, but it's not the base reality. Really, these beings, God is the base reality, and physics is the substrate, the structure within which his created beings, principally humans, interact, live and move and have their being.

Brian Krouse:

Maybe it is a little different when you talk about neuroscience because at this point, we're talking about the brain and in some sense the interface between the immaterial mind and, I guess, an idealism would be the-

Doug Axe:

Yeah. That's really interesting. Michael Egnor is a colleague who contributed to the volume, who is a... He is not a materialist. And I think we had a meeting of the authors for the mind-brain volume where he seems to be transitioning from being a substance dualist to at least entertaining the value of idealism.

Brian Krouse:

In particular, he's keen on Thomistic hylomorphism, which is a variety of substance dualism. Yeah.

Doug Axe:

Yes. But I remember in this meeting he was saying.... He was...

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, I remember that. So we're going to have him out here to Biola, and I'll have more conversation with him in the spring. But yes, if I were a brain person, and last week I thought that everything that a human is thinking, everything that a human is perceiving, their consciousness, all of that mental activity is neural functions, on Monday, after this transformation over the weekend, I would see the brain more as an interface or as a... It's actually not even the interface. It's like the pre-processor that does calculations. And it might do them in a neural net kind of way. I'm open to that.

It's doing calculations, but the end result of those calculations is just a physical state that then God picks up and presents the corresponding mental experience to the mind. And that's a very different view of what the brain is doing. It's not less important, but it's not all-encompassing. The brain is not the person. The brain is an important organ that does this pre-processing, either of incoming signals before they're presented to the immaterial mind or the pre-processing of motive signals coming from the mind before they become a body action.

Yeah. So I suppose as a neuroscientist under this framework, you wouldn't really expect to assume you could have a complete picture of the computational dynamics of what's going on in the brain. You wouldn't expect that to sort of represent the whole computation or everything that goes into a thought or a decision or whatever cognitive thing we're talking about.

Doug Axe:

But if we go back, last episode, to you and I playing catch with a baseball, there is, I think, a profoundly important role for the brain, taking what would otherwise be a bewildering array to me... If God were feeding me, "Okay, here's what this rod and this cone are doing at this moment," I would have no way to make sense of it. So I think the brain is this remarkable organ that's taking this huge flood of data, of signals, physical signals from rods and cones for visual, and putting it through a process that resolves it into something that's ready to be reinterpreted as a visual experience and given to the human mind.

Robert J. Marks:

That strikes me kind of like swarm intelligence, where you cannot look at the behavior of an ant colony by looking at a single ant. It has a collective emergent behavior, and that's the case with rods and cones.

Doug Axe:

And probably neurons in the brain. Not looking at any single neuron, you would have a very weak notion of what a brain is doing, but the whole thing collectively is doing something truly remarkable. But what it's not doing is thinking. It's doing this pre-processing.

Robert J. Marks:

And we have the capability, interesting, of analyzing. We have the meta ability of analyzing that processing. One of my favorite quotes by Emo Phillips is that I used to think... Here's his quote. "I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body. Then I realized who was telling me this." We are able to look at what comes from our brain, inclinations to do things, and exercise, if you will, free won't or free will on that.

Doug Axe:

Right. That's tricky territory because I would say that our mind has inclinations that are apart from anything in our brain, but it's also true that, and I think this can be shown in things like OCD, there are things where behaviors that become habitual behaviors really do induce a brain change that actually can make the situation more set in so that these habitual behaviors are being induced by a brain state that's sort of pushing you into these behaviors. But also some of the best work on resolving and treating humans who struggle with things like this is showing that even though you are going to get this impulse that is maybe coming from a brain state that's pushing you in this direction, you can stand above it. And that's the free won't.

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly.

Doug Axe:

You can stand above it and say, "No, I'm not going to do this." And if you do that enough, you will benefit from a retraining of the brain.

Robert J. Marks:

That gets into neuroplasticity, which is something like your friend Michael Egnor would be talking about, I'm sure. So interesting. In terms of whether or not the quantum mechanics could be challenged, this was famously historically challenged by Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen in the so-called EPR challenge. This was resolved by something called Bell's inequality. They kept trying to prove Bell's inequality. Now, the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen Challenge was that quantum mechanics was kind of this emergent behavior that looked random, but underlying, there was something more deterministic going on. It's like you roll a bunch of die a few times, and it looks like the outcome is random, but if you look at the Newtonian mechanics of the way the dice were thrown and how they bounced around, et cetera, you would find out that it was indeed deterministic. So that was their challenge.

But Bell came up with an inequality, which was experimentally verified, gosh, I think... I don't know when it was verified, but they kept trying to apply and prove Bell's inequality. But they finally got an experiment where things didn't collapse. They were having problems maintaining coherence of the experiment, but finally they got something which nobody could challenge. And I think that the randomness and the inherent randomness of quantum mechanics is pretty well established now because of Bell's inequality.

Doug Axe:

At least the non-causality. And that's in recent memory. It was maybe 20 years ago, 25 years ago.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it wasn't that long ago. You're right.

Doug Axe:

Recent, if you're old like I am.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, thank you. Okay.

Brian Krouse:

We have another interesting chapter in the book by Gary Habermas where he catalogs and discusses a bunch of fascinating varieties of near-death experiences.

Doug Axe:

Oh yeah.

Brian Krouse:

So this is an interesting example to maybe try to apply idealism to thinking about. So there's a bunch of flavors, but let's just imagine the quote, unquote garden variety of this, where you're in the operating room looking down on yourself being operated on. So how do you think through that from an idealist perspective?

Doug Axe:

Yeah, so the worldview that that is most going to challenge... So let's take the example, and I've heard these, and I have a book... I've read several of these where you're in operating theater. Your heart has stopped. You're sort of clinically dead maybe for at least a few seconds, and you have a conscious experience where you're maybe even above the hospital. And I've heard once where you see something on the roof of the hospital, like there's a shoe, a pink shoe on the roof of the hospital. And then they revive you. By God's grace you live on, and you talk about this experience, and then they go up and there's the pink shoe.

So what happened here? Of course, I know a lot of people will say that these are fabricated. I'm certainly willing to believe that they're true. I haven't done independent research on them. What they challenge is a physicalist interpretation of humanity, because clearly if a human mind, soul, spirit can be separate and from the body and conscious, then that's the end of... You can't accept that if you're a physicalist materialist because now this would be proof, if you accept it, that consciousness doesn't necessarily have to have the physical body as a substrate. One can be conscious and aware and even perceive true things that can then be validated and verified outside of your physical body.

Brian Krouse:

There's some fascinating examples of... Just to interject another couple of flavors. There's some where you've got a near-death experience from a patient who was born blind, and then as part of their experience, their out-of-body experience-

Doug Axe:

They have sight.

Brian Krouse:

... they have sight, and they see things in color. And they come down, and once they're resuscitated, they could describe things from their visual perspective.

Robert J. Marks:

There's a great book by Bruce Greyson called *After*. Now, he's a psychiatrist. He spent his life as a medical doctor looking into near-death experiences. He founded a journal which addressed near-death experiences. He started a conference which is still meeting on experiences. And he handed his book and says, "Man, there's just no explanation for what goes on, even after all of these times." I talked to the originator of integrated information theory, Tononi, at University of Wisconsin. And he's a neurologist. And we talked a little bit about near-death experiences. And he says, "Well, I don't believe in those because I can give you some LSD or some peyote, and you can experience situations like near-death experiences." But just as you pointed out, it doesn't explain all of these things that happen, which are beyond a naturalistic explanation, like a blind person seeing or seeing the pink shoe on the roof.

Doug Axe:

So if we loop back to connecting this to idealism, I think the implications are very similar that a substance dualist and an idealist would view these quite similarly. It does go back to Brian's question about where is the mind? Because in this case, if we go to the person who was maybe clinically dead for a minute or something and then has a visual experience from a perspective maybe hovering over the hospital, in that case, it's not that I'm going to answer as an idealist. It's not that the mind has a location, but the mind has been given a conscious perception from a vantage point that could in fact be located. And this person could say, "I was like 30 feet above the hospital right over here," or, "I lifted up from above the bed. I saw myself and then I was above the hospital." So certainly, the vantage point when you're interacting with the physical world can be given a location. But that's different from saying that the mind itself has a location.

Brian Krouse:

And I suppose when you're in your body, and this equation in God's mind, it's representing external world, including your body and your brain, that is ordinarily being maintained by God's action in connection with our thoughts. And then in this case, when you're out of body, you still are sort of located conceptually within this from a vantage point within this equation. It's just that the action of God is not being mediated through-

Doug Axe:

Brain function, presumably.

Brian Krouse:

... sort of these elements of the brain function equation, that it's just a little more direct somehow.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, this has been a great conversation about Dr. Axe's chapter in idealism in the new book, *Minding the Brain*. Doug, I wonder if you could just offer us a summary of the things we've talked about, the summary and the gist of your chapter in a nutshell.

Doug Axe:

Yeah. So really, it's a chapter that tries to introduce idealism with the assumption that it's probably a foreign concept to a lot of people. And the chapter does that by interacting with two alternative worldviews. One is physicalism, the idea that there isn't anything other than the physical universe, and the other being substance dualism, which is the idea that there is a physical universe, which is hard material stuff, and within it are human bodies, which are physical, and within those bodies is situated an immaterial mind, soul, spirit. So this goes back to Descartes.

And the hope of the chapter was that I could show, just through thought experiments and commonsensical reasoning, what goes wrong with those two alternative views. First, the physicalist view where it goes, I think, disastrously wrong, and less wrong for the dualist view, but also wrong in that there are things, particularly surrounding how we understand how God interacts with the material realm and with us, and bridging this gulf between the physical and the non-physical experience in a human body. I think dualism runs into problems.

And not only that, if we just look at people who have pursued physics as though it is the base reality, you end up with a version of physics that's a very strange reality and very hard to embrace as a base reality. It has all kinds of contradictions and conundrums that it throws up as though God, in making the



physical structure to the universe, part of its beauty is that it declares to you, "I'm not the base reality. Don't look here if you're looking for what's the base reality."

So that'd be my summary, that I've landed personally on this idealistic view. I'm a Christian, and I think it comports really well with how scripture describes creation, God, humanity, how we relate. But I'm certainly open to further dialogue, and I recognize that it's a little bit of a head scratcher when you first encounter it. So part of what I was trying to do in the chapter is maybe resolve some of the things that seem weird about it and let people kind of think about it.

Robert J. Marks:

And I would recommend the chapter that Dr. Axe has written in the book *Minding the Brain*. It's not written for the specialist. It's not written for the philosopher or a specialist in neurology. It's written to somebody that's educated and just wants to find out more about it. So congratulations on your writing style, Doug. We didn't have the success with all of the chapters in the book, but we did our best to enforce it. So thank you very much for being with us today.

And thank you Brian Krouse for co-hosting with me and walking me through things which I didn't understand. And I can tell you, I learned a lot during this podcast, and idealism all of a sudden kind of makes sense, so it's something I'm going to have to scratch my head about. So we've been talking to Dr. Doug Axe at Biola University about idealism. It's a chapter in the new book, *Minding the Brain*. And again, to find out more about the book, visit [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). That's [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). This has been a great time together. Until next time we meet on Mind Matters News, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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