

Exploring the Immaterial: A Conversation with Dr. Selmer Bringsjord

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Flynn Host:

Hello everybody and welcome back to the podcast. This is your host, Pat Flynn. And today I am joined by Dr. Selmer Bringsjord, who is the author of a very fascinating and provocative piece in the recent volume, *Minding the Brain*.

This piece argues for the immateriality of mathematical objects and furthermore, the immateriality of the human person, or at least an immaterial aspect of the human person. And this has very wide implications in philosophical anthropology, obviously the nature of the human person, and opens up some really interesting avenues of exploration concerning postmortem survival and the afterlife and everything else.

So I'm excited to explore this fascinating argument today and to dive into some of the details of Selmer's paper. So Dr. Bringsjord, thank you so much for taking the time to be here. It's a delight.

Selmer Bringsjord:

Well, it's mutual. I'm very honored to be here and looking forward to our conversation. Thank you for the kind words.

Flynn Host:

So in part one, what I would like to do is just hear a little bit of your personal background and what first got you interested in this area of research. And then I would like to just sort of lay the foundation for this argument. This is to my mind, I think this is one of the most powerful arguments for the immateriality of the human person, but it is a technical argument. It is a hard argument to understand.

So I would really like to just present the general structure of the argument in the simplest possible terms starting out, just so people understand the direction in which we are going for the next three episodes. So that'll be the plan and we'll stick to it as best as we can. But Selmer, if you wouldn't mind, give us a little bit of personal biography. Who are you, what do you do, and what got you interested in this area of research?

Selmer Bringsjord:

Yeah, sure. As far as I can tell, just recently read some psychoanalytic work about early childhood. I don't buy it, but it's fascinating stuff. So I mentioned this first because it's as far as I can tell, that's the phrase I used. I don't know if before three I was interested in the mind. But I vaguely remember, but yet undeniably it occurred, talking to my mother at five about mental issues and the resurrection story, which I had heard about and so forth.

And it wasn't that long after I remember in school thinking about what these crazy things were. Definitely in second grade I remember I was a troublemaker. I know this sounds preposterous and certainly will anyway to some people, about the nature of these mathematical things we were doing with addition, multiplication. And now I enjoy talking to my oldest granddaughter about this, who's just about to turn six, and it's amazing how far you can get.

So I was always thinking about who I was and who these other wonderful "Persons" where I was interacting within my family and fundamentally who we were. And then thinking really always about this math stuff, which I continue to be fascinated by.

So I know this, again, sounds manifestly implausible, but it's for me, very real. So when I started to get... Let's jump to algebra, when you're first introduced to that in the sixth grade. I had a wonderful teacher, Mr. Muchio. And he was amazing as an entrepreneur educationally, he submitted a proposal to New York State as I recall, and managed to get funding for a group of students who would start learning math essentially on their own in a group. And today this kind of thing would be frowned upon, to put it mildly. But there we were as a group first starting on algebra and having wonderful conversations.

And I remember asking people in the group, my good friend Jimmy, and then Mr. Muchio, "You know Mr. Muchio, what actually is this stuff fundamentally? What is this? We have these equations and we have these variables. Is this just... were just playing games, manipulating physical stuff here on our paper?"

This is before the advent of computers in education that started much later in first computer aided instruction, at least in a widespread way. Patrick Suppes, is really the innovator of that, at least in the United States.

And Mr. Muchio is very tolerant. I think most of the responses did fundamentally boil down to shooing me away. But I kept going on that. And then it really wasn't until my Spanish teacher, Mr. Ruak, when I was ready to take the Spanish AP and he realized, "Oh my gosh, Selmer, I don't think you're going to do well on that. You really don't know too much Spanish. But you really know a lot, it seems, about Cervantes when he talks about weird logic puzzles, you really like to look at the abstractions there." And I said, "Yes, Mr. Ruak, I'd like to talk about that."

And I went to his house and he recently passed away unfortunately. And we started talking about the nature or the essence of this logic stuff that was going on here. What did it mean to say this proposition that we're looking at does not correspond to a physical object, or this argument for there are paradoxes... This argument for why this is an absurdity because it leads to a contradiction either way? Where is that in the physical world? And then there were some borderline, it was really intolerance. My two calculus teachers in high school, I think they weren't as tolerant as Mr. Ruak.

And so at some point in talking to Mr. Ruak, I decided I was either going to study something like this for purposes of law or maybe I would stick with it. And so really I've been thinking about the rudiments of this argument and the key issues in it. What's the nature of what I early on thought would all be covered by the phrase mathematical objects. I now use the phrase, and it's used in the paper in question, logical mathematical objects because some of them are informal logic. What's the nature of those things and what does that imply about the nature of us?

I really can't come up with a stretch during my life when either I was intensely skeptical about these objects being non-physical or I was thinking, "Gosh, I think these objects are non-physical and that implies something deep about us." And then if we continue with the boring autobiography, then I go to college and then things get really concrete because I happen to have a key professor as an undergraduate who wrote about this and had been thinking about this much more carefully, needless to say, than me.

And then in graduate school that professor's own advisor at Brown University. So both at Penn and Brown, here I am starting to get deeply into the issues at a much more rigorous level.

Flynn Host:

Yeah, that's fascinating. And I'm sure people are already beginning to pick up that this is an involved argument. There are many technical aspects to it, but here's what I like about this argument and let me frame it from my own initial experience with the argument and then I want you to spell it out to people as if they were seven years old because things will get technical here.

But I think that the general thrust of the argument is simple enough to understand at least when it's presented in a certain way. And what fascinated me about this argument is when you look at a lot of different arguments that are trying to set out more or less, that there's something about the human person that is nonphysical or immaterial. A lot of them focus on say the qualitative dimension, human consciousness and the hard problem of conscious stuff like that.

But this is an argument that's not really focused on that at all. Rather it's really focused on our power of reason. And that just utterly fascinated me. It seems to be more in line with a very traditional Aristotelian way of thinking about the immaterial aspect of thought. And then once I sort of encountered certain contemporary philosophers, James Ross, being the big one himself I believe was at Penn for many years.

The way that he introduced the argument initially was very simple but very profound. I remember it just struck me with a huge amount of force as being really a quite compelling argument that since I've thought about it for many, many years, I've only become even more sort of convinced of its power.

But what Ross would say is this, that sort of all formal thinking is determinant. Now it's important to understand when we're using the term determinant, we're not talking about issues concerning free will or anything like that of determinism we're talking about meaning, this is an issue of semantics.

So when we say that formal thinking is determinant, we mean that it has a very sort of unambiguous meaning to it. That's what Ross is up to. And we can give some simple examples to impress the idea here in a minute. But he says that formal thinking is determinant. However, no physical thing or physical process is determinant Any physical thing you take, just take a triangle. It's always open to various interpretations.

You draw a triangle on the board, what does it represent? Does it represent an isosceles triangle, a red triangle, or to borrow an example from philosopher Ed Feser, does it represent the obscure forgotten pop band called, Triangle? There's nothing about the physics of the matter that can sort of lock down a specific determinant meaning right? It's always to some extent ambiguous or vague and open to possible interpretation. So no physical process is determinant as Ross argues.

And he draws upon many great thinkers who argue exactly this, and it sort of puts you in an interesting position. You can either I think, bite an absurd bullet and just say that, "Okay, well, I guess no thinking is determinant then," which leads to a host of absurdities. Or you can go the other way, which Ross does and just suggest, I think this is the only really plausible option, that no formal thinking is actually a physical process, right?

So that to me is the general thrust of what this argument is about. And then there's obviously many further avenues of exploration from there, but I'm sure it's still probably a little bit obscure or vague to people. So how do you, Selmer, would you introduce it differently? How do you just like to introduce people to what this argument is about? Give them the 10,000-foot overview, if you will, so they can track with the further conversation we're going to have.

Selmer Bringsjord:

Yeah, no, that's great. When I alluded to a professor at Penn and then one at Brown, I was indeed referring in the Penn case to Ross, and then in the PhD case in Brown, to Chisholm, Roderick Chisholm, my advisor there.

But I should say I was always a little skeptical. I'm still skeptical to this day, that might be the wrong word. Both Ross and Chisholm flirted... Chisholm explicitly in publications with the possibility that even in their minds as open-minded as they were about such matters, persons could be physical things themselves.

In the case of Chisholm, you could be a little tiny enduring thing that survived, could survive your traditional death. And even when the worms start eating your body, this thing would survive. I could never tolerate that flirting because I had already found at least two of Descartes' arguments in modern form rigorized to be quite powerful for outright immateriality of the person.

So when Ross shows, and he does, and you're right, I piggyback on it directly and say so, that thinking is immaterial. Well, that's one thing that actually does relate to today's treatment of consciousness in different forms. Because property dualism, with respect to thinking, with respect to mental activity, mental states and so forth, mental attributes. There are a lot of people who can't go all the way and say people are non-physical fundamentally.

But they'll say, "Well, attributes that you have, those things can't be identified with any neurophysiological states and so forth." So I wanted to extend Ross and say, "All right, once we get to where you got to Professor Ross, then we have to consider what's the nature of the thing that's doing the thinking." The thinking, okay, I think you're right. And he does cite contemporary analytic philosophers in support of the determinateness that you point to.

But I wanted to get all the way there and see if the argument could be extended. And that's what Naveen and I purport to have done, at least in step one in the paper. But you ask also boil it down, I think you said, for a 7-year-old. Well, it's real easy. It's real easy to get off the ground with, I don't know... Well, yeah, I would say with indeed a 7-year-old.

So all you have to do is say, "Are you studying any math in school?" Of course there'll be giggles and maybe fidgeting and so forth. "Yes." "Okay, where is some of that stuff you're using? You got sheets, you got web pages, textbook, where's the stuff on what you're learning in arithmetic?" "Oh, I'll show you." In the case of my granddaughter will be Morfar, which is the mother's father for grandfather on the mother's side, and we've started to do this.

"Oh, okay, so this is great Dagny." In my case, that's the grand... "This is wonderful. I love this. Two plus two. If I have two things and two more things, I get four things. Let's see where it says that here." You go to the book, it says two plus two is four. And then you ask, "Where is that?" "What do you mean that? What?" "No, where's the four?" And then it's, "Well, there are four apples here in the picture." "No, no, no, no. The four, the symbol here. Where's that? Where's that?" "It's right there in the book." "Are you sure? Because I write it the same thing like this, two strokes plus two strokes equals four strokes."

And you are absolutely right. If you try to come at someone who's not seven but 47 with a PhD in whatever discipline, say you should be a dualist or something like that, because of consciousness, their first thought is, consciousness. Millennia have been spent on trying to figure out what that term or something like that term means, but four. So you show me where the four is, and of course this is a dead end. They're not going to be able to show you where it is because you can write four.

In fact, if you look at the inscription, the physical inscription in an infinite number of ways, maximally, you can, I mean, minimally, you can write it in as many ways as you have configuration of physical objects to make for an embodiment. And that's a big problem right off the bat. If you can't say where it is, now you really have two alternatives. You can start to move towards saying, "Oh, my gosh, the thing itself might be embodied in multiple ways in the physical world, but the thing itself would be abstract and nonphysical." And Ross and Chisholm and many other folks, Chisholm aggressively across his work, held this as a basic first result in trying to set out any kind of deep physics or metaphysics.

He didn't really like to make a distinction. He thought that all good physics would have to commit to philosophical positions. So he regarded the whole thing to be at a deep enough level of philosophy. But that's how you start with a 7-year-old, and that's only for the number four. Then you can get a little older. You say to the child, "Hey, do you got a number line anywhere here? Do they tell you that some of these numbers keep going?" And they say, hopefully, if they've been paying attention and working hard, "Well, sure." And if it's the granddaughter, a couple of years down the line, "Morfar, yeah. It's 1, 2, 3, 4, and it continues forever." And I've been doing with her the... You can tell I kind of torture my grandchildren, I'm sorry about that, at least intellectually. "Give me up to 10, can you?" "Sure." And then at the age a little bit later, it's, "Yeah, Morfar, it says it keeps going."

And then you say, "Well, where is that collection of stuff? Where is that?" And of course, at too young an age, this is totally mystifying, but later on, when you get to the sixth grade that I talked about, the sixth, seventh grade, when we have to, at least in the United States, we are supposed to sneak in explicitly algebra. And then you realize, "But if I'm solving for X, I'm solving over a general set that is... Oh my gosh, infinite. Where could that be?" That's going to be hard to find because most physicists, I'm not in that camp, but think that even the entire physical universe is finite. So where would that thing be? So the first choice is to start leaning toward, "Oh-oh, this might be nonphysical." The only other choice ultimately, I don't know if you agree, would be to say it's all just fake and we are just stipulating that these are the symbols we'll use in what's fundamentally a game.

And that doesn't go over too well with people who do formal things, do things in logic and mathematics, which is reflected in the fact that most mathematicians to this day, not applied, but most mathematicians in the pure sense and logicians are platonists in their inclinations, if not outright platonists. Which means they have to accept the reality of the non-physical nature of these things. So that's step one to get the argument off the ground. And then as you know, you then have to ask the next question, which is, I admit, you said it's technical. This one is much harder to do without getting into some heavier stuff.

What are you such that you can apprehend or understand how to use these non-physical things? Of course, you're using their embodiments, but-

Flynn Host:

So that's excellent. And maybe just to offer another illustration to facilitate thought on this, just think about triangularity, which we take to be a universal. And for people who are unfamiliar, universal is really just a similarity between forms. And you can ask the same thing, "Hey, where is triangularity?" To a young child. And you might draw a couple different triangles on the chalkboard, but again, as you can quickly point out, none of those are triangularity, they're particular triangles that are always to various extents, imperfect at best approximations, right?

Selmer Bringsjord:

Yes.

Flynn Host:

And when it comes to the nature of formal thought, you suggested that there are various ways that physicalists can try to respond. And I guess they could try to bite the bullet that we just never really have any sort of determinate or exact or unambiguous thought or formal thought processes. That's not just absurd, but its self-defeating to say that we never really think about triangularity assumes that we are thinking about what triangularity is to deny that we ever think about it.

It's already there, it's already in the background, or that we never engage in affirming the antecedent or modus ponens would really just render any potential argument structure for that conclusion, immediately invalid. So I really think you're kind of stuck with accepting the non-absurd proposal or solution here. I know Ross throws out various retorsion arguments to support that as well. And I want to say before you even extend the argument to make the case that the human person is immaterial, I mean, even step one is bad news for the physicalists, right?

There's something immaterial "floating around" that's not... that itself is very significant. If you're a hardball physicalist, you should be very uncomfortable with just that, let alone the implications for the human person. So I wouldn't want to just gloss over the force that we already have on the table just from those initial reflections. Do you agree with that, Selmer?

Selmer Bringsjord:

Oh, Goodness. 100% in agreement and probably upwards of 25 times over the course of my career in the room, in a debate, what's quickly heading toward a debate with a physicalist or a materialist, just starting on this first question of what are we going to do with the objects that we're both thinking about and has been put on the table?

I have noticed, this is not just sanguinity because I'm not a physicalist. I have noticed that I think other people in the room in these cases when they're there, have as well that there is an immediate lack of balance. It's like you can feel it. "Oh yeah. I better start thinking about if I'm going to continue this debate, I need to start thinking about how much of a strong bite on how large a bullet am I willing to stick to, because I have to admit this is going to get to the point where I can foresee it. Oh, darn. I'm going to have to say that everything is vague." as you pointed out earlier. "Everything is kind of indeterminate or it's just a game, and we legislate mathematics."

And yeah, you're absolutely right. We don't want to lose sight of that, the power of the first move if we're opposing, as we both are across the board physicalism.

Flynn Host:

Yeah. And to that, I would say, man, I think that is a great place to break here for the first part of what we plan to be a three-part series on this fascinating argument. So I want to thank everybody for tuning in and listening. And of course, in the next part, we're going to begin to dive a little bit deeper and explore some of the finer details of Selmer's very fine article in the volume, *Minding the Brain*. We will see you then.

Announcer:

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