The Science of Mind: Debunking Materialism, with Dr. Michael Egnor

https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep304

Pat Flynn:

Okay, everybody, welcome back to the podcast. My name is Pat Flynn. I'm happy to be hosting a conversation with Dr. Michael Egnor and we are going to be talking about all things mind, brain, dualism, the nature of the human person, neuroscience and the soul. I'm sure it's going to be an absolutely fascinating conversation. Mike, I'm delighted to be here with you. This is our first time having the chance to converse with one another. I'm very excited. So thanks for making the time to be here.

Michael Egnor:

Thank you Pat. It's a privilege to be here. I'm so happy as well.

Pat Flynn:

So you have a very impressive resume, Mike. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to begin with just a little bit of your personal history, whatever you think is relevant. I'd be particularly interested in hearing about what got you interested in the philosophical debates, particularly in philosophy of mind, the nature of the human person, the nature of mind, and how that has connected to your background in neuroscience.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, sure. It is a very, very interesting thing. I started out as a kid, I knew I wanted to be a surgeon of some sort. I was kind of oriented towards that kind of work. I was very interested in the brain and how the brain worked. And I got into medical school and I became just enthralled with neuroscience and neuroanatomy. There was a big textbook of neuroanatomy that kind of made it relatively easy to learn. It was like a program text and I just dived into this. And I had this wonderful feeling of discovery that somehow I was going to understand my soul and understand what it meant to be human if I knew enough about how the brain worked. That was like all the mysteries of life were going to fall out of how the brain worked.

So I studied a lot and I decided to go into neurosurgery because I kind of felt like that was the most direct way to understand how the brain worked is to actually operate on it and see people before and after and learn. And what I found as I began practicing neurosurgery was that there's a whole lot of stuff out there in the real world that really doesn't fit the textbooks. The textbooks are written by and large by people who have never seen a living human brain and have never seen or treated a person who has a brain problem where you can actually understand. These are basic scientists, these are people who work with lab animals and they have all kinds of book knowledge, but the real world doesn't always match up.

A good example was a little girl that I take care of, I'll call her Cindy, that's not her real name. But she was born with a twin sister and she was born with very little brain tissue in her head. Probably 80% of her brain was missing, the rest was just water and her twin sister was normal. And I counseled her family that she probably was going to be profoundly developmentally delayed, it was going to be really bad. But she was a newborn. And newborns, you can't really tell a lot about their brains because they're kind of simple little creatures anyway. And as the months and years went by, she grew up just fine. And we had her sister who was normal to compare and she was even more advanced than her sister. And she ended up on the honor roll in high school and I still follow her. She's in her twenties. She's a very

smart young lady, her mom says she's too smart for her own good. And probably 80% of what's inside her head is water. And there's nothing in any of my textbooks that explained that or even predicted that.

And I've got scores of patients with these strange stories. And that doesn't mean that missing a big part of your brain is good for you. And there are plenty of people who are missing parts of their brain who are pretty disabled because of it, but not everyone. So I began to look first into neuroscience and then into philosophy to try to understand this because it was very clear to me just in my everyday work life that the books didn't get this right. There was something else going on. And of course, I also, I started out my life as an atheist and a materialist and somewhat at the same time in kind of a similar process became a Christian. So I started to look at human beings differently than I looked at them before.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. Well that's absolutely fascinating, and what I'd like to do is divide this conversation in three parts. The first part I want to focus on the neuroscience because I would say there's still a general impression among probably most people that neuroscience is going to complete the materialist project. It's going to clean up those remaining questions, particularly about human mind and consciousness and all that. And you have some strong challenges to that that I want to cover. And then there's lots of frequently asked questions that you get Mike related to neuroscience in the soul that I think we should also tackle in part two. And then part three, maybe we could sort of nerd out on the philosophical position that you think is most fruitful, which I am also very sympathetic to, which is Thomism or Thomistic dualism.

So that's how this conversation is going to proceed. So why don't we begin at the best place, which is the beginning, the first part. Mike, help us to understand what the science is actually telling us. One of the things that struck me as really interesting about your contribution to minding the brain is that you do claim, and I think this is right, that the science, the neuroscience actually does have something to say about the sort of different metaphysical proposals on offer when it comes to the nature of the human mind. That the science can give us various degrees of confirmation or disconfirmation of these broad metaphysical accounts of the human mind. I think that's fascinating. I think that's interesting. I think it's worth talking about. So in fact, maybe we should just discuss what those metaphysical proposals are. You list three in the chapter, Mike, so if you wouldn't mind, if you think that's a good place to start, why don't we take it up there?

Michael Egnor:

Sure. First, just in defense of the general principle that science and metaphysics have to agree. I think that's true, meaning people tend to think, so myself, philosophy is like this abstract thing that's separated from reality, and then there's a cold hard science. But the reality is that metaphysics is the study of being. It's a study of what it means to exist. And science is the study of what things do exist, and they've got to be the same. The Venn diagrams have to overlap. If they don't overlap then either science or metaphysics or both are wrong. So there's nothing wrong with applying metaphysics and philosophy to scientific work. In fact, you kind of have to.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, and not only that, I'll just add that philosophers are often very scientific in their metaphysical theories. They go out there in the literature and they say, here's my metaphysical theory and here's what I would anticipate from it. Here's what it predicts, and here's why I think that this is a good theory or a bad theory. And even very traditionally, you have all sorts of, sometimes you have objections to God or Christianity that assume this. For example, the problem of evil is assuming that theism, the

metaphysical theory that God exists is inconsistent with the data of suffering or evil or something like that. Right now, I don't think that that's ultimately correct, but people sort of do operate with this assumption anyways. But it's interesting to see people who think or sometimes claim that these two disciplines, metaphysics and science have nothing to say to one another. I'm with you, Mike. I think that that's incorrect.

Michael Egnor:

And rather interestingly, there's a profound ignorance of science on the part of most philosophers of the mind, really a deep ignorance. And there's a profound ignorance of philosophy on the part of most neuroscientists. Most neuroscientists know probably nothing about philosophy. And so it is kind of astonishing the separate worlds in which these people live and they need to get together on this. And they need to get together objectively with no preconceived notions.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, I agree. So yeah, let's try and make that conversation happen. Yeah, all right. So what are the three theories of mind on offer here? And then we can discuss what they are and what sort of predictions we think they make.

Michael Egnor:

The three theories of mind roughly speaking, the first is materialist. And that's the theory that the mind is entirely generated by the matter of the brain. That is that however the mind and brain relate, and there are various different ways of looking at that, idealism and behaviorism and eliminative materialism is a whole bunch of things. But the idea that the mind and the brain are either the same thing or that at least every aspect of the mind comes from the brain, basically it's all about matter. The second viewpoint is idealism, which is a view that the only thing that really exists is mind and matter is an aspect of mental experience. And I've quite a bit of sympathy for idealism, but I don't think it's the best way to look at the mind. I think it is the best way to look at physics, actually, particularly quantum physics.

But the third way to look at it, which is a way that goes all the way back to Aristotle is dualism, which is that there are some aspects of the mind that are very tightly linked to the brain, and no one doubts that. I mean, obviously your brain has quite a bit to do with your mind. But dualism proposes that there are aspects of the mind that are not really generated by the brain. You might call those spiritual aspects, which I think is a pretty good word for it actually. So the dualist is in the middle. He says there's some material things in the mind, but there's some immaterial things as well. And it's dualism that I will defend here.

Pat Flynn:

I always like to point out, it's almost an obvious point, but I think it's worth mentioning that we didn't really need modern or contemporary neuroscience to know that the brain had something to do with the mind. I mean, everybody kind of knew that if you got hit over the head things change, a phenomenal experience.

Michael Egnor:

...figure that one out. Yeah, right, right.

Pat Flynn:

So, all right, very good. All right, so we've got our theories on offer. And these theories give us certain anticipations, don't they, Mike? Or make certain predictions about what we might expect at least under certain conditions or from certain experiments. So help us map that terrain and then maybe we can talk about what we actually find when we run those experiments. This should be fun.

Michael Egnor:

Well, there's a very interesting way to look at it. The materialist kind of says that everything in the mind can be traced to the brain in some direct way. And the dualist says that, well, some things in the mind can be traced to the brain and some things can't. And the first organized body of research that I think really challenged the materialist way of looking at things was that of Wilder Penfield who was a neurosurgeon who worked back in the early and mid-twentieth century.

And Penfield is probably the greatest neuroscientist in the neurosurgical profession. And he really invented so to speak, the field of epilepsy surgery, of operating on people for seizures. So he devoted his whole career to figuring out epilepsy. And the first thing he did was he began a systematic study of what we knew about epilepsy. This was back in the 1920s and 30s, just everything that was ever published and written and this whole knowledge. And he noticed something that struck him as very odd. And I should point out, he started out as a materialist. So he came at this thinking everything in the mind is from the brain and I'm going to figure out epilepsy and it's all going to make sense. What he noticed in his review of all of human knowledge about epilepsy, and this remains true to this day, is that when a person has a seizure, certain things can be evoked from the brain.

A seizure is like a random electrical discharge, like a spark that comes out of nowhere and randomly in parts of the brain. And certain things happen when you have a seizure. And he said there really are only four things that happen when people have seizures. One thing that can happen is that your muscles can jerk, so you can have movements. When people have a generalized seizure, they fall down on the floor, they shake. So the second thing that can happen is that people can have odd perceptions. They can have a tingling in the skin or see flashes of light or smell funny smells. He said the third thing that can happen is they can have powerful emotions. There are some seizures, they're relatively rare but they happen where people will have this just incredible sense of doom, of dread. And there's one kind of seizure, which I think is fascinating, is called gelastic seizures, where people think everything is funny. They just laugh constantly, everything is funny.

And the fourth thing that people can get in a seizure is they can have memories. You can have all of a sudden a memory of your mother's face or a memory of when you were in school, things like that. But Penfield said that's where it ends. That is that there's no other mental content that ever appears in a seizure. He said, for example, you never have a mathematics seizure. You never have a seizure where you can't stop doing calculus. You never have a logic seizure, you never have a philosophy seizure, you never have a music seizure, you never have a literature seizure. This whole range of abstract thought, things that kind of make us human are never a part of a seizure. And Penfield said, why not? If random electrical discharges in the brain will spark off a thought, why aren't the thoughts ever abstract? Why aren't they ever about math? And so he said then maybe the mind isn't entirely from the brain. Maybe there are aspects of the mind that are spiritual and not material.

Pat Flynn:

I was really fascinated to read that, neuroscience is not my specialty by any stretch, but that struck me because I mean that cuts right across the classic to mystic divide of perceptual ideas and conceptual ideas. So I think this would be a great example where, hey, there's something in the science that seems to be leaning towards or confirming this very traditional Aristotelian or Thomistic understanding of the

mind where it wasn't substance dualism, and we can talk about that later, but it was the idea that there are certain powers that we have that are immaterial, powers really related to intellect and will. And so this research is fascinating because I think it's giving some confirmation to this traditional division. Do you think that's right?

Michael Egnor:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And the thing is that this has been around in neuroscience circles since the early to mid-twentieth century and Penfield wrote a book on it actually called Mystery of the Mind, and it's been in his published literature. And it gained no traction, meaning that neuroscientists would read this and just went on their happy materialist way, just ignoring Penfield's observation. The second thing he noticed, which is absolutely fascinating, is he then went on to the operative treatment of seizures. So he would do awake brain surgery. And what that means is that he had to stimulate the surface of the brain and the deeper parts of the brain sometimes in people who had epilepsy to make a map of the brain so he could determine when he found the spot where the seizures were coming from. If he removed that spot, would that cause damage?

So he didn't want to remove a spot that was in your speech area or that was in your motor area because you'd be unable to speak or paralyzed. But if the spot was in one of the large areas of the brain that doesn't seem to have an irreplaceable function, you could remove that safely. So he had, it was 1100 patients, 1100 patients had awake brain surgery by him over his career. And during those operations, there were hundreds of stimulations and things that he would do to map the surface of their brain. So there were hundreds of thousands of mappings going on. And Penfield found exactly the same thing that he had found in his review of epilepsy. That is that when he stimulated the brain, he could stimulate people to move their limbs. He could stimulate people to have perceptions like flashes of light or feelings on the skin. He could stimulate emotions by stimulating certain parts of the brain and he could stimulate memories, but he could never stimulate abstract thought. He could never stimulate mathematics. No matter where he touched in the brain, you didn't start saying one plus one is two.

And so he said exactly the same thing that he had found in his study of epilepsy he found in the study of brain stimulation that the only four things. So he said, it looks like what he called the mind, which was what you or I would call the intellect, the will didn't come from the brain. Now it undoubtedly is true, and Penfield would say the same thing, undoubtedly is true, that to properly exercise your intellect or your will, you have to have a brain that's working okay. So the brain is in some sense necessary for intellect and will, but it's not sufficient.

Pat Flynn:

But not sufficient, right, yeah.

Michael Egnor:

And so Penfield's work is fascinating. He also made a fascinating discovery about free will, which we can talk about shortly. The next bunch of experiments that are utterly fascinating. And to me, there's an aspect of these other experiments that gives me chills, absolutely gives me chills, is split brain surgery. There's a kind of a seizure where the epilepsy begins on one side of the brain as a little tiny focus, like a tiny spark, and it doesn't cause much of a problem. Sometimes the patient isn't even aware of it, but it can spread across the middle of the brain to the other hemisphere. And when it spreads, it becomes a generalized seizure, a terrible seizure where you fall down and shake and lose consciousness. And what it spreads through is something called the corpus callosum, which is this massive bundle of nerve fibers

that connect the two hemispheres. It's like a bridge that goes from the right hemisphere to the left hemisphere and vice versa. It's about the size of the palm of your hand. So it's a huge bunch of fibers.

And it was recognized in the 1940s that if that fiber bundle could be safely cut in surgery, that you might be able to stop these terrible seizures. And they didn't have really good medications then for seizures. So these patients were, I mean, their patients would've 30 seizures a day. So they tried it in animals and it worked, and the animals seemed okay, even though they literally were cutting their brain in half, the right and left hemispheres were disconnected. But the animals seemed okay and their seizures stopped. So they started doing it in people and really in 1950s and 60s. But we still do it today. It's still a part of the neurosurgical repertoire, and it works very well. It really can help people with seizures a lot.

And Roger Sperry was neuroscientist who worked in the mid-twentieth century, maybe a generation after Penfield. And Sperry realized that, wow, we have this whole bunch of people who've had their brains cut in half. And while they seem to be perfectly okay after cutting their brains in half, which itself is very odd, they would be interesting to kind of study what each half of the brain does separately. So he devised a whole series of very clever experiments, beautiful experiments, and he found all kinds of neat things. The left side of the brain usually controls speech, right side of the brain usually controls spatial orientation. It's all kinds of interesting stuff he found, and he won the Nobel Prize for it. But I think that the most remarkable thing that Sperry found was that you could cut the brain in half and practically nothing happens.

The only thing that happens takes Nobel laureate level research to detect. The analogy I've used for that is imagine you've bought this neat new computer and you take a chainsaw and you cut the computer in half with a chainsaw, and it still works just fine. There's nothing wrong with it. That's a pretty odd computer. And it would imply that there's something about that computer that you don't quite understand yet.

Pat Flynn:

That's right. That's right.

Michael Egnor:

And so you can cut the brain in half and not much happens. And Sperry did note that that was odd, but that wasn't the focus of his research. The person who began to take that seriously, the first person was Justine Sergent. She was a neuroscientist who worked at McGill in Canada back in the 1980s. And Sergent did what I think is the most brilliant work in this stuff. And what she did was there are ways that you could present a picture, like an image to the right hemisphere and a picture, an image to the left hemisphere. And if you're a split brain patient, these hemispheres can't talk to one another. They don't communicate. So what she did was she would present, for example, an arrow pointing up to the right hemisphere, and she would present an arrow like pointing sideways to the left hemisphere, and she would ask the person who had had the split brain surgery, are the arrows pointing in the same direction or different directions?

And the split brain patients almost always got it right. They almost always could tell, they could compare something that the right hemisphere sees with something that the left hemisphere sees. The problem is that there was no part of their brain that saw both things. And so how did they know? How do you compare things when no part of your brain sees both things? So that just gives me chills. I mean, it's like there is the human spirit.

Pat Flynn:

Right, right. And I think one of the major implications of that is that is not what you would expect from a materialist paradigm as it might-

Michael Egnor:

Absolutely, it's utterly inexplicable from any kind of materialist perspective. Now, there are two pre provisos here that Sergent being a very good scientist addressed and other people have addressed as well. And that is, is it possible that there are other pathways. That is the corpus callosum is the big guy. There are tiny pathways that you may be able to sort of short circuit and get around where the hemispheres might communicate. And what she and others have done with that is that we know the length of time it takes for the nerve impulse to travel through those short circuit areas. And it's immeasurable, hundreds of milliseconds. It's not instantaneous. And she looked at response times of people, and that effect never showed up.

That is that there was no evidence that anything was kind of cheating, going on inside. And furthermore, certain things were split. Certain perceptual things were definitely split. For example, the right hemisphere usually doesn't have language. So if you present a word to the right hemisphere, the left hemisphere is where language comes from. In split-brain patients they know what the word means, but they can't say it. So that still worked, but there was a part of the person's mind that could compare two images that no part of the brain could see. The best work done on that is recent work by a guy named Pierre Pinto, who's a neuroscientist from the Netherlands who has extended Sperry's and Sergent's work. And he's replicated a lot of what Sergent did, and he's gone a little further. And what he likes to do is he will pick a story in pictures and he'll present one part of the story to one hemisphere, the other part of the story to the other hemisphere. But the story only makes sense if you understand both.

So an example, if you present to the right hemisphere a picture of a broken window, and to the left hemisphere a picture of a baseball, and you ask the split-brain patient, what does this story tell me? Most split-brain patients will get it right, they'll say the baseball broke the window. But no part of their brain sees both the baseball and the window. So how can they put the story together? So what Pinto said, he said that we've misunderstood the split-brain phenomenon in the past, thinking of it as like two separate people. It's not two separate people. He said that consciousness is united although perception can be divided, but there's still something that's united in the human being despite splitting the brain in half.

Pat Flynn:

And that's fascinating because again, that's intention to say the least with the materialist paradigm. And I think it's important that when it comes to looking at the scientific research, one should be confident in what it says, but you don't even have to say that this strictly disproves materialism. You can just say, Hey, no, this is the sort of thing that is far more likely if materialism is false. If say dualism is true because the dualism holds, at least the Thomistic one as you point out in your chapter, Mike, that there are aspects of the human person, the human mind that are divisible, but there's other aspects that are not. And that seems to be sort of what we're seeing in these split-brain experiments. Is that right?

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. Yes, definitely. But I wouldn't quite be so generous with materialism.

Pat Flynn:

Oh, I like you're going to be even punchier.

Michael Egnor:

Oh yeah. The fact is that this research as it stands utterly disproves materialism.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, wow. That's great.

Michael Egnor:

Now, it may very well be that in the future, new evidence will come out that gives materialism a way out of this. But right now there is no way out of it, that is that materialism is disproven simply by this research. Again, Maybe there's new research, but the evidence we have in hand right now, materialism is wrong.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. I'm trying to think of how materialists could even try to contrive their hypothesis to save it. But nothing off the top of my mind it seems.

Michael Egnor:

What they would have to do is to show that there is some other way that the hemispheres communicate in a physical way, material way. And so far all the evidence is that there is no other way. And if they can show it, hey, I'm wide open to evidence.

Pat Flynn:

But the best evidence right now says no.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, it's not probabilistic. It's not that there's an 80% chance that dualism is right. This research says dualism is right. And if new evidence arises, then we can look at that. But materialism in this view is contradicted by the science in a very obvious way.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. It's funny because sometimes you do hear from materialists. You get this promissory note like, hey, someday neuroscience is going to clean all of this up. But what you're saying Mike is actually, if we go with the best of what neuroscience has right now, it confirms dualism. So we don't need the promissory note. We can just go with the best science that we have right now right?

Michael Egnor:

Right, right, absolutely. And the funny thing is that materialists are often the most emphatic proponents of science except that science doesn't support their ideology. There's another experiment that Penfield did that also gives materialism a real problem on free will, which is very interesting. Penfield was, he actually had been a philosophy major in his undergraduate years and was very interested in the question of free will. So when he would map the brain in these 1100 patients, he would always identify if he was in that region of the brain, the motor strip, which is an area of the cortex that controls movement on the opposite side of the body. The brain has no sensation of its own. That is you can stimulate the brain and the brain doesn't feel anything.

And the patients who were having the surgery were under surgical drapes, so they couldn't see what he was doing. So he had a very clever experiment. He would ask the patients, he'd say, every once in a while during the surgery I want you to raise your right arm under the drapes. And every once in a while, I will stimulate the arm area of your brain and I'll make your right arm raise. And so whenever you see your right arm raising, I want you to tell me, did you do it or did I do it? And every time he did it, or every time the patient did it, the patient got it right. Nobody was confused about whether they moved their arm or Penfield moved their arm. And Penfield said he couldn't find anywhere in the brain where he could trick somebody into thinking that they voluntarily moved their arm when they didn't.

And he said, so that means that free will is real and that free will isn't in the brain because there's no area of the brain where you can stimulate and simulate free will. But the most interesting research on free will came from Benjamin Libet who was a neuroscientist in the mid-twentieth century. I think Libet should have won the Nobel Prize. And I think probably the reason he didn't was because the stuff he had was so fascinating and cutting edge that they were a little skittish. It was like weren't sure it was real, but it turns out it is real. I mean, there's been a lot of follow up on it. But he did beautiful work. His obsession was with what he called mind time. And what he meant by that is he wanted to know exactly what's happening inside your brain at the moment you have a thought. Most of the studies that have been done of brain waves and thinking and so on, they don't link time and thinking in a way that allows you much resolution.

That is that you can't say, well, at this moment, down to the 10 millisecond mark, I was thinking of this and this thing was happening in my brain. So he wanted to know at the exact moment, what is your brain doing? So he devised an experiment on free will. It's become rather famous where he took normal people. These are not split brain people, these are just normal volunteers. He put electrodes on their scalp to measure their brain waves. He sat them at a table and he put a button in front of them. And he asked them to just go ahead and pushed the button whenever you felt like it. Just say, I'm sitting here, I'm enjoying, it's a nice day out. I think I'll push the button. You just push the button. He had an oscilloscope, which is an old thing, looked like a clock in front of these people.

And he asked them, when you decide to push the button, just glance at the exact moment you made that decision on the oscilloscope and just let me know what that time was. And they could get it down to, that's like the 20 millisecond level. And he did hundreds of trials on each person. And so he could tell within like 20 milliseconds when the person made the decision to push the button. And he had brain waves being monitored constantly during this, and he had monitoring of when the button was actually pushed. So what he found was that around half a second before you consciously make a decision to push the button, there's a spike in brain wave activity in your brain. And that brain wave activity happens before you consciously decide. And then you consciously decide half a second later. And then maybe two-tenths of a second later, you push the button. So he said, at first glance, it looked like you didn't really freely choose to push the button. It looks like your brain kind of fired.

And then suddenly you think, oh wow, I just decided to push the button. But no, your brain made you do it. But being a really good scientist, he took the research one step further and he asked people who were doing this, when you decide to push the button, every once in a while, veto your decision. So actually when you say, I'm going to push the button, say immediately, oh, no, I'm not, I'm not going to push the button. And he looked to see what the brainwaves looked like when people did that. And what he found was that the brainwaves didn't do anything new. There was no new brainwave to the veto. So he concluded from all of this that what was happening was that the brain in a sense was giving you temptations. The brain was kind of pre-conscious saying, hey, why don't you push the button? And you go in and start to push the button, but you have to accept or reject that unconscious thing. And your acceptance and rejection isn't from the brain. It's free. It's spiritual of sorts.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. Now, isn't that fascinating, Mike, because again, it's commonly heard that this science refuted free will. But it seems like when you actually look at it, exactly the opposite is the case. How did things get so distorted around that?

Michael Egnor:

Because scientists aren't honest. I don't want to beat around the bush, they lie.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, appreciate it.

Michael Egnor:

And they're either deliberately lying in the sense of they know what they found. Or just as likely is that they just don't know enough about the research and they're just listening to what is kind of commonly said. But when you read Libet's work, Libet very much believed in free will. He was a property dualist, and he actually said a very funny line which has become famous. He said he wouldn't really say that he proved free will, but he proved free will.

Pat Flynn:

That's right.

Michael Egnor:

That is, he proved that you can freely veto things that you do. And he pointed out how this remarkably confirms traditional religious understandings of temptation and sin. It says you're being bombarded with these pre-conscious desires, but you retain the free ability to accept or reject them.

Pat Flynn:

The true voluntary action. And I think most people can just see that that is phenomenally accurate. Just in daily experience.

Michael Egnor:

You would ask a fascinating question, Pat, about why would scientists misrepresent this work? Because you're quite right, it's widely misrepresented. You ask a hundred neuroscientists about Libet's work.

Pat Flynn:

They say, oh, the guy that disproved free will, right? Yes.

Michael Egnor:

95% will say he disproved free will, which he did exactly the opposite. And I think part of the reason is just ignorance, they actually probably haven't read what he did. The second thing, which is very real, is that science is a very, there's a lot of herd instinct in science. And the reason is that your entire professional survival depends on approval by other scientists.

Pat Flynn:

Indeed.

Michael Egnor:

I mean, I had a friend, actually have a friend who's one of the leading biologists in the world. He's a very, very accomplished guy. And I was at a meeting with him, and he knows I've been involved in the intelligent design movement. And he came up to me at one point and he said, I know what you're doing in the intelligent design movement, and I think you're exactly right. He says, but I can't say a word about it, I can't say a freaking word. He said, if I were ever to make a public statement that I agreed with that-

Pat Flynn:

Career suicide.

Michael Egnor:

... I'll never see another grant. He said, literally, I would lose my family's health insurance. He said that I would have to work in McDonald's. Said that I would be completely blackballed. So scientists, there's a viciousness in the way scientists approach this. Any scientist who comes out with a dualist perspective is toast.

Pat Flynn:

And of course, one sees the same thing in philosophical circles-

Michael Egnor:

Precisely.

Pat Flynn:

Certain ideas there's bully pressures to conform and to confirm those ideas, or at least just keep silent if you have criticisms about those ideas.

Michael Egnor:

Right. And being a clinical doctor has made my life a lot easier because I kind of have a day job, and so it doesn't really affect me. But if I were a basic scientist and I relied on grants to live, I'd be toast.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, yeah. What a shame. Of course that's a fascinating conversation for another episode, which I would certainly love to have. But one more point on that. Are you optimistic for the future about that, Mike? Do you think the culture is starting to shift in a more positive direction? Do you think the materialist grip is waning, or what's your pulse on that?

Michael Egnor:

It's a very good question. Materialism is dying and as it's dying a justified death. But I see materialism as a doorway. And I believe in intelligent design. But I believe that intelligent design exists in the affairs of humanity and not merely in biology and in cosmology. That is, I think I'm a very spiritual person. I believe in Satan as like I believe in God, and there's a satanic movement afoot that is profoundly ugly. So I think that atheism and materialism which kind of go together, that's not an ultimate way to look at the world. Some people they have called it, and I think it's kind of true, it's bookless. And what they mean by

bookless is that it is such a boring stultifying way of seeing life that it's never going to get anywhere. It's like you're never going to have somebody writing profound books like Aristotle's work or Thomas Aquinas' work, or Bonaventure's work, all these beautiful people that have written these fantastic things. That will never happen in the materialism.

Materialism and atheism are cheap, stupid ideas that will never get anywhere. But they do have a purpose, and they have a very important purpose. Their purpose was to discredit Christianity. Their purpose was to make people think that Christianity was ridiculous. The natural religion of mankind is paganism, it's not atheism or materialism. And there's a lot of spirituality out there, but it's very wrong evil spirituality. So I see materialism I see the new atheist movement as just a way to open the door to paganism.

Pat Flynn:

And that seems to have been exactly what has resulted from it I think.

Michael Egnor:

We're rapidly paganising. And so actually I think dualism will probably have quite a resurgence, and I think the pagans will drive the materialists out.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah, interesting.

Michael Egnor:

But the dualism that will come in the future will not be intelligent dualism. It'll be kind of an eerie, weird dualism. So I'm not the least bit optimistic.

Pat Flynn:

So optimistic in the waning of materialism, but not necessarily what will be replacing it. So very good and very fair. This has been a fascinating part one, Mike. We'll hit pause here for the listeners, and when we come back, we're going to keep the conversation going. We've been joined here again by Dr. Michael Egnor, and we are discussing a whole lot of stuff. But most of this you can find in his recent contribution in the volume Mining the Brain. We'll talk to all of you here soon.

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.