

The Impact of Descartes on the Philosophy of Mind

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Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. In 1637, René Descartes published the now-famous phrase, "I think, therefore I am." Undoubtedly, Descartes works have had far-reaching impacts on philosophy and across many disciplines. This week we have Joshua Farris, and neuroscientist Michael Egnor, discussing just how broad these impacts have become. Enjoy.

Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor. I have the great pleasure and privilege today to speak with Dr. Joshua Farris. Dr. Farris is the Humboldt Fellow at the Royal University of Bochum. He specializes in religious anthropology and has thought and written very deeply on philosophy of mind, and recently organized a wonderful conference that I had the privilege of being involved with. It was a conference for design and theology project. Welcome Joshua, and thank you for joining us.

Joshua Farris:

Hey, good to be with you, Mike. Thank you.

Michael Egnor:

So I have been looking at a fascinating paper that you recently published in the European Journal of Science and Theology called Descartes' New Clothes: Cartesian Thought in Philosophy, Neuroscience and Theism, which are three very big topics, and Descartes himself is a very big topic. Could you tell me a little bit about what you wrote in that paper?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, sure. So as you stated, philosophy of mind has been of interest to me for some time, especially the implications or application of the philosophy of mind to a religious or a theological anthropology. And so this past year in my research, I've been focusing more on cognitive science and biology and looking at different ways to make sense of that as a real source of knowledge for theological construction or religious construction.

Joshua Farris:

And so, one of my projects was this one that you've mentioned Descartes' New Clothes. And in it, it's kind of a different paper than what I've written before because it's a mix between the history of philosophy, the analytic philosophy of mind, and then looking at the implications of those together for theism, of which there is a growing set of literature and fascinating literature that overlaps with both science and philosophy.

Joshua Farris:

And so this is a, and I say that normally, well, I haven't written on this, and typically these aren't brought together. Typically, historians or philosophers are not doing the same sorts of things as analytic philosophers. There's very much a niche, detailed focus in analytic philosophy, whereas the history of philosophy, they're looking at larger patterns within history and philosophical moods, patterns and signs and the like.

Joshua Farris:

And so in part, this paper as a way to, I've thought about this over the last several years. It wasn't directly related to my fellowship research, but I started thinking about it again this past or last year. And it not only was fascinating to me, but it seemed to be or set up some framework or some background for thinking about where contemporary philosophy of mind, personal identity discussions have been for the last 60 years or so and how they've developed.

Joshua Farris:

And so in this paper in part, it's motivated by Tom Sorrell's book, *Descartes Reinvented*, where he does something similar, which is unusual for an analytic philosopher, to tap into the history of philosophy in a richer way and bring that into conversation with contemporary analytic philosophical discussions, which he does in his book.

Joshua Farris:

And I come at this to some extent as a theologian or philosophical theologian. And I saw some places to really upgrade some of his thinking, especially as it pertains to neuroscience. And so how some of Descartes ideas seem to be in the background of both relevant contemporary analytic discussions as well as neuroscientific discussions. And these discussions together have live, it seems implications for theism and they seem to yield or point to or signify theism in some way.

Joshua Farris:

And so as you know, in many of the philosophical as well scientific discussions, Descartes is kind of a whipping boy. And in some ways I argue that his ideas are not only in the background, but he's left a ghost-like impression with us that is always there in an overwhelming sense. He's in the background of these discussions. And so I try to really bring that out in this paper and discuss some of the ways in which that is the case or seems to be the case.

Michael Egnor:

Most moderns would say, "Well, he's always there for better or worse," but he certainly is always there. What are Descartes old clothes? That is, that you describe his new clothes in your paper, but what are his old clothes? That is, where did he start from in terms of his effort to understand the mind and the brain, or the mind and the body relationship, and to understand theology in relation to those things?

Joshua Farris:

Well, so I think his thinking begins really in the development of a book, *Rules of Discourse* as well as some of his other works that are behind the scenes in his famous work, the *Meditations*, whereas, *Meditations* is in some respects a more mature way of working out his method. And of course he's responding in his contemporary setting to some of the atomists of the day as well as the Aristotelians, which he doesn't think can do justice to some of the scientific work. He is laying out a kind of new science, and he's doing so in these various works.

Joshua Farris:

Particularly, the *Meditations* is of particular importance where he's doing this, where he seems to have these central ideas that are prominent throughout the corpus of his writings. And they relate particularly to the nature of mental properties or consciousness. And these properties are so

emphasized throughout the corpus of his writings that later on, for those who are attuned to many of his writings, you can see the traces and how these discussions seem to replay themselves again, in other words, in the last really 60 years, especially in contemporary analytic discussions where these discussions are really live again.

Joshua Farris:

So it's a metaphor for his old ideas that he worked out, and then there was a response to him and there was a kind of rejection of him. And then there was a heightened kind of awareness in the history of philosophy in the 1900s, especially in adopting certain forms of logical positivism and behaviorism and the rejection of any sort of mental substance or soul as Descartes calls it in some of his works. Particularly, he uses the soul in his later works that he writes.

Joshua Farris:

But then you stumble across these new discussions, you might say, you might call them new, where there's a rediscovery of difficulties with the nature of consciousness, particularly qualia or qualitative experience, as well as the hard problem of consciousness, famously termed by David Chalmers, the contemporary analytic philosopher. And in many ways, these discussions don't look all that different from the discussion that Descartes was having in the day in his response to various philosophical systems that were parallel or very similar to philosophical materialism.

Joshua Farris:

And also, the solutions that have been provided quite commonly are both a rejection of Descartes' substantial dualism, but what they do offer in its place isn't really all that much better. It doesn't seem that it's better at all, in fact. And it doesn't seem to be much of an improvement on Descartes. And some of them are beginning to look more and more like Descartes' substantial dualism. And so those are interesting things.

Michael Egnor:

One thing that I've noticed in reading the classical philosophers on the issue of mind-body relationship is that the modern dilemmas that we face in understanding that relationship really were not dilemmas for the classical philosophers. For example, qualia was not really a problem for Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and all of the great ancient philosophers. It seemed that these problems began with Descartes. And one might say, "Well, that's because Descartes recognized that they were a problem, the other philosophers didn't."

Michael Egnor:

But that wouldn't be my perspective. My perspective would be that Descartes created these problems because of his metaphysical underpinnings. That is, he separated mental activity from physical existence as two separate substances. And if you assume that physical, material things, things that are extended in space, *res extensa*, don't have mental properties. And then you do as the moderns have done and you eliminate mental properties, that you don't believe that the mind has any kind of separate existence whatsoever. Then you can't explain them because your metaphysics, Descartes' metaphysics, *res extensa*, doesn't include any mental properties. So how do you feel about the critique of Descartes that he created the problems rather than tried to solve them?

Joshua Farris:

I do think that's a common way of looking at Descartes. He created problems. Some would say that he even was the starting point for a more stubborn sort of materialism that would follow because of the reductionisms that he adopted in terms of the mind and in terms of the body.

Joshua Farris:

I see him in a more positive light in that I see what he did highlight we're seeing picked up and developed in varying positive ways in contemporary analytic discussions, particularly some of his emphases upon the nature of the ineliminable I or the ineliminable subjectivity. There's something about that that I think was really lost, maybe not lost, but not present in any robust way prior to him in the ancient worldview or in the ancient philosophers that gave primacy of place to the I, the subject, the particularity sort of issue that became heightened or highlighted in modern discussions.

Joshua Farris:

So these notions of what it means to be a person, what it means to be an I, and how the I functions not only grammatically, something that we can't seem to rid ourselves of. There seems to be some sort of mental property that's predicated of an I, and those mental properties have been fleshed out in fascinating ways in recent discussions in the philosophy of language, particularly as people like Alston, as well as others like Putnam defending anti-realism have developed and picked up on these insights from Descartes and run with them in different ways.

Joshua Farris:

But I think some of the other ideas related to that, and that is the nature of self-authority and the fact that within Descartes' system, we have this emphasis upon some kind of epistemological authority that seems to be primitive in where we predicate our authority. At some level, we predicate authority to the I that's having the thoughts about their own experiences in the world. And this is related as well to his discussions about the nature of consciousness as something that is irreducible, certainly irreducible to matter. It's altogether distinct from matter.

Joshua Farris:

And so I think either we do depart from some of his stronger theses or we take up some of his ideas and mold them into a newer form of Aristotelianism or something. I think there's still a really positive stamp that Descartes has left that has really brought clarity to some of the scientific and philosophical discussions because of, well, because of him and his emphasis upon, well, how do we arrive at some sort of authoritative understanding of science itself?

Joshua Farris:

Well, we do so by clarifying our ideas, making distinctions between those ideas, which are all hallmarks of the analytic tradition, which I think again hearkens back to René Descartes and his emphasis upon his whole method of meditation and arriving at sufficiently clear ideas about what it is that we're talking about when we're talking or when I'm talking.

Joshua Farris:

And so I see his legacy as I guess much, more positive, maybe too positive for some. And all of this is related to a bigger picture of his epistemological project of foundationalism, which I think too is something that is widely discussed today in philosophical and scientific discussions. And again, that hearkens back to Descartes' ghost that he has left with us.

Michael Egnor:

And could you briefly describe foundationalism?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, so Descartes, he was really interested in this project of undermining philosophical skepticism. And in order to undermine philosophical skepticism, he had to highlight and reassert the authority of the I and the I as having some sort of inner perspective or privileged access to one's own thoughts that precede some sort of third-person thought or some sort of empirical method. And foundationalism was later developed as a philosophical and epistemological position that has a set of philosophical axioms that serve as the foundation for knowledge itself.

Joshua Farris:

And so arguably, Descartes is largely responsible for those contemporary discussions that we're having now about what are the foundations of knowledge and how can we have any sort of certainty? There's different degrees of certainty, of course, what we mean by that. I don't necessarily mean some sort of absolute certainty, but how can we arrive at certainty of knowledge that undermines the philosophical skepticisms of the day that we can have any knowledge or we can know anything at all.

Joshua Farris:

So we have to reintroduce this notion of the subject and the subject as being the primary place in which we begin to arrive at knowledge of things in the world.

Michael Egnor:

He's famous for his aphorism, "I think, therefore I am." And it certainly does appear, at least on first glance to be the one thing that we can be sure of. That is, even if we doubt our own existence, we have to exist in order to doubt. But I've had a problem with that perspective in that it is possible to think but not to exist. If there are no laws of logic, there are no laws of necessity. That is that the term, therefore, I see as the most important word in the "I think, therefore I am" sentence. That is, if logic doesn't apply in the world, then you could think and not exist because there's no therefore, there's no logic connecting the two.

Michael Egnor:

So it would seem to me that the thing that you can be the most certain of is the existence of a logical framework in creation, which I think points to God's mind. That is that what we're living in is essentially the logical framework of the divine mind. So I feel as though he didn't go deep enough in the assertion, "I think, therefore I am," because it really is an affirmation of the reality of cause and effect of logic.

Joshua Farris:

I don't want to press too hard to defend Descartes what exactly he meant by the cogito. There's one thesis by a Descartes scholar that says that, well, he was defending basically an axiom, an axiom that is the product of common sense rather than this airtight argument.

Joshua Farris:

But I do think picking up on the epistemologist Roderick Chisholm, I think he develops something that I think is implicitly Cartesian in character along these lines that there is this ineliminable cogito that we

can be certain of or sure of and maybe have even infallible certainty. Now that's too strong, maybe that's too strong, I don't know. But it can certainly provide or furnish a part of the foundations of our knowledge that is the most certain thing that we can know.

Joshua Farris:

If there is a logical structure in the world, he says, "Well, we arrive at the knowledge of the logical structure by this ineliminable I." And Roderick Chisholm calls these self-presenting properties for us to have access or any sort of awareness of any sort of logical structure as providing the foundations for a knowledge.

Joshua Farris:

He would too say that for us to have that there's always a property of presentation that is present and distinct from representation. And so there is some sort of self-presentation that is always implicit in our knowledge of what is within the logical framework of the world. And so that becomes something that is foundational.

Joshua Farris:

Roderick Chisholm is doing something different than Husserl. Husserl is very Cartesian also in his phenomenological project and in his phenomenological project where he takes basically ... Phenomenology is a project that takes phenomenal experiences, somehow basic and a basic indicator of what is in the world and what we can know. And it serves as, for him, well, the inverse of the Kantian transcendental.

Joshua Farris:

Anyway, in his phenomenological structure, Husserl develops these ways in which we actually do have this intentional relation between our consciousness, our conscious awareness and the things that we come to know. So that we can know, when we come to know something in our phenomenological experiences, that there's always this intentional structure that it's already rooted in, which presupposes an I that is metaphysically certain or unchallenged. And we can have certainty about it, at least some sort of psychological certainty, if not epistemic certainty.

Joshua Farris:

And of course, you have some contemporary epistemologists, only a few in the world, not very many who are arguing, well, we actually have metaphysical certainty about these things and about the fact of the I that lends credence to a kind of apodictic certainty about things in the world. So I think it's hard to eliminate the cogito structure that Descartes so famously pressed upon the social awareness and the history of philosophy. I think it's hard to excise that from our system.

Michael Egnor:

Eleonore Stump, who I'm sure you know, she's a philosopher who works from an Aristotelian perspective, she's at Saint Louis University has argued, as have many philosophers, that we don't really have certainty at all. That is that there is absolutely nothing we can be certain of. One might even say that you can't even be certain that there is no certainty, that we are completely dependent upon faith of one sort or another to make sense of existence, that we cannot get by without faith.

Michael Egnor:

And her argument for the existence of God is that a theist, certainly a Christian theist, believes in a rational God who created a rational universe with cause and effect that can be understood with laws of logic and that he wouldn't deceive us. So our faith in the rationality of our existence is grounded. It's well-grounded metaphysically. It's still a radical faith, but it's grounded.

Michael Egnor:

Whereas, an atheist or someone who denies the rationality of God has no ground for their faith and they have faith no less than the Christian theists do. So I certainly don't doubt that I exist, but I do doubt that that can be demonstrated without faith in the validity of logic and reason. It's still faith.

Joshua Farris:

I guess I would have to look at her argument in more detail. I think even if it's faith, there's still this self-presentation that is ... It's hard for me to know that I can know that there's these logical principles that are real, that exist in the world and that exist in a way that I could know without knowing that I also exist.

Michael Egnor:

Wittgenstein perhaps spoke to this, not about Stump but to this dilemma, I think rather nicely in saying that, I'll just paraphrase him, that there are two ways that we think of as knowing. One is to know in terms of perception, conception, and so on, and the other is to experience things. And experiencing something is not a kind of knowing, really. It's just experiencing. For example, I can know if someone else has a pain based on how they behave. They can say ouch and shake their finger and things like that, but that's not how I experience pain. I just experience it and what I experience is not a kind of knowledge. It's not an epistemological question, it's an experiential question.

Michael Egnor:

Now, if I wanted to know that I have pain, I could look at myself in the mirror and see how I behaved and infer from the way I behaved in the mirror that I was having pain. But I don't need to do that because I'm actually having the pain. But having the pain isn't a knowledge about my pain, it's just having it.

Michael Egnor:

And one could say that may trace back to Descartes who I guess kind of said that there is this undeniable I, this undeniable essence of me that you can't get around. And I think that is true, but I don't know that that kind of I can be demonstrated logically. It's just a matter of experience.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, this is interesting. It takes us into a discussion that I wouldn't claim to be an expert on. I would say this though, when we're looking at say, the philosophy of beliefs and philosophy of experience, some might argue like Edmund Husserl and Roderick Chisholm, that there is a sort of intentional framework that is implicit knowledge already that we have knowledge of, we know, that's implicit in all of our experience. And without that intentional structure, the experiencibles or the qualias would not make any sense apart from that intentional structure, which itself is implicitly knowable.

Joshua Farris:

Even if it's not something we could articulate or something that we have awareness of or that we, I guess, well, just articulable knowledge. I was looking for the technical term, but my mind is failing me at the moment. But I think this comes down to this bigger discussion about the categorical nature of foundational items within one's epistemic wherewithal. And so Edmund Husserl talks about this as being implicitly Cartesian in nature because of the intentional structure that is set up between the I and the properties that an I can have about the world that is already presumed or grounded in this broader intentional structure of seemings and intuitions.

Joshua Farris:

So if we have these seemings, these seemings are already rooted in certain intuitions that we have that are sturdy, reliable, and can't be excised from one's system. So he makes the further argument that there is a sort of intentional structure that goes beyond the epistemic and even the linguistic structure that we exist within and experience to a metaphysical structure that is present therein.

Joshua Farris:

And so those are fascinating discussions that take us into deeper discussions about the nature of whether or not Descartes was right about some of his own ideas that seemed to furnish the foundations for his overall project, his new science project. I wouldn't be so confident to defend all of his ideas, although I'm very sympathetic to them, and I think he might be right.

Joshua Farris:

But again, in some ways I think he's highlighted things that were not there prior to himself that are very positive and good, but also I think he's really working within a broader, rather than explicitly Aristotelian framework, a broader Augustinian framework that I think he really just extends into modern day.

Michael Egnor:

Could you shed some light on how Descartes' perspective informs modern neuroscience?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, thank you. I think related to the contemporary analytic philosophy of mind discussions, there are these stamps or imprints that Descartes has left on the discussion historically that the wheel seems to come back around to Descartes once again in terms of the kinds of problems that he's dealing with, particularly what we now think of as the hard problem of consciousness, and relatedly to the solutions that are being offered that are surprisingly looking more and more like Descartes' solution in what many or most think of as a robust or strong substantial dualism, where there are these property-bearers that are radically distinct property-bearers, two different types of substances, namely the body that has a spatial extension and the mind that is altogether distinct from the body.

Joshua Farris:

And whether or not it is spatially located, obviously this is a fascinating philosophical discussion as to whether or not thoughts themselves are spatial in some way. The fact of the matter is that there's something about the nature of thoughts and thinking and properties that are predicable of minds or a characteristic of the mind itself are distinct from the body in a way that makes the two different and strongly so in similar ways as Descartes would and has described in many of his writings.

Joshua Farris:

And so there's a variety of solutions that are on offer today. And many of them that are really trying to wrestle with the hard problem of consciousness and take the mind seriously, many philosophers would say that many philosophers as well as scientists who are scientists of the mind don't take the mind seriously, and in fact are constantly trying to talk about the mind in ways that reduce it and effectively eliminate the mind or the properties of the mind.

Joshua Farris:

And this is something that the philosopher Stephen Priest has talked about when he describes the conditioned paradigm, which is prevalent in many of the discussions on the mind, particularly the science of consciousness, discussions that are quite prominent. What they end up doing is they end up functioning according to these conditioned patterns of thought that serve or intentionally act in a way toward the mind as if it is just this object, this part, this third-person thing that we can know about from an objective standpoint as an external observer of it. And we can then make sense of it in a rigorously scientific way.

Joshua Farris:

I think some of these dynamics are not only present in the analytic philosophy of mind discussions with their varying solutions that try to reduce everything to one singular set of properties that try to bring together the material and the mental properties. We're seeing these heavily philosophical discussions come up again in a lot of the, it seems, in much of the neuroscience literature or the neuroscience of consciousness and self literature of which I've only recently in the last year or so have started trying to digest that literature.

Joshua Farris:

And there are noticeable traces and patterns that are reflective of similar patterns in contemporary philosophy of mind that are fascinating, but also, again, point us back to Descartes and the irreducibility of consciousness to matter and the fact of this radical distinction between the two types of property-bearers that cannot be reducible one to the other. In fact, as we talked about before, it seems that there's this implicit distinction between them that is present in the discussions that we're constantly wrangling with. And it comes up again in neuroscience as well.

Michael Egnor:

But those implicit distinctions seem to have come from Descartes. That is that it is not only that Descartes has struggled and people who followed in his footsteps have struggled in a very admirable way to try to make sense of all this. But it was the metaphysical framework that Descartes proposed that kind of got us into this mess to begin with. And what some people have called our modern way of trying to understand nature is a mechanical, natural philosophy that human beings are in some sense machines. And we try to find the ghost, we try to find what it is in the human machine that accounts for the mind. And of course, Descartes himself believed that animals lacked souls, that they were simply meat machines.

Michael Egnor:

But the philosophers who worked from a hylomorphic perspective, which many if not most of the ancient philosophers did, didn't struggle with this. This wasn't a problem for them because in the hylomorphic perspective, we're not machines and the mind emerges in a rather natural way from the understanding of the human being from a hylomorphic perspective.

Joshua Farris:

Okay. Yeah, so I think this is interesting. So there's one way to get at this discussion. And going back to Stephen Priest, he talks about these conditioned philosophies of which the empirical sciences of consciousness would fall into that category. And he says, "We need to experience a kind of deconditioning to open up the discussion." But by opening up the discussion, I think it's going to lead us back to Descartes and his substantial dualism.

Joshua Farris:

And here's where I think one of the interesting discussions comes in. There are these two common ideas or key features you might say that are reflected in some of the neuroscience itself and consciousness literature that continue to re-present themselves. One is this notion of internalism, and the other that's overlapping and related is this notion of Cartesian materialism.

Joshua Farris:

Internalism is this idea that the properties of consciousness or the properties of the mind, mental properties are predicable of physical properties themselves or neural properties. And so there's this conditioned, you might say this patterned tendency from neuroscientists of consciousness to simply look at brain scans and see in those brain scans when they see certain spatial regions or neurons firing to see mental properties in them and to predicate mental properties to them.

Joshua Farris:

But this underlying philosophical question that I think Descartes and the Cartesians are right about is that there is this sense in which these two don't touch, and we can't simply predicate mental properties of neural properties. Because what ends up happening, and there's a whole method in here that I spell out in the paper that seems pretty clear across some of the more popular, prominent neuroscientists of the self, specifically that literature. There's a whole vast set of neuroscience literature that I haven't even ... and you know a lot more about that.

Joshua Farris:

But particularly the neuroscience literature that's trying to deal with the self and consciousness, there are these language adoption strategies, these methods that they use in order to systematically excise or root out this Cartesian idea that there are these properties that they are saying are actually predicable of the neural properties and somehow internal to those neural properties. But what they end up doing, they end up saying things that not only become philosophically fascinating but problematic.

Joshua Farris:

I think from a materialist vantage point, and maybe even from a monist vantage point more generally, is that they end up predicating these properties and saying that, "Hey, the mental property is here at this point," by doing brain maps and doing neural connection maps and saying, "Hey, the mental property is here at this point, but just not in the same way that the neural property is here at this point." So there's this mysterious kind of magic trick that they end up doing. And then there's this whole elaborate language adoption strategy so that they can root out speaking about minds as if they are actually minds with these distinct types of properties that are already implicit in our discussion about the brain and the mind itself.

Joshua Farris:

And so I think that's problematic, this notion of internalism, this predication of mental properties to the neural properties themselves simply because, say, maybe there's a causal triggering or there's some sort of trigger in the neural map that seems to causally bring about certain mental ideas or experiences or feelings or things of that sort. That that means that somehow they are identical, they're reducible, they are somehow even spatially present there. If they are spatially present, which I'm not sure about, they're certainly not spatially present in the way that the neurons are spatially present and can be quantified. If they are present, they have to be there, present in a different way, which becomes interesting and mysterious.

Michael Egnor:

It's difficult to say that a mental state or a mental entity could be spatially present because of several reasons. One is that we never refer to the location of a mental entity in a way that matters. That is that Einstein didn't distinguish $E=MC^2$ from when he thought about it in Berlin as opposed to when he thought about it in Paris. Location doesn't seem to play into mental entities in the same way as it does to physical entities.

Michael Egnor:

We'd spoken in our last session a little bit about eliminative materialism for which I have a great deal of disdain. However, my disdain is because it's materialistic, not because it's eliminative. I really think that if a materialist is consistent in his metaphysics, he has to be an eliminative materialist because you can't have mind in a materialist metaphysic. It just doesn't work. How do you feel about eliminative materialism as a philosophical perspective?

Joshua Farris:

How do I feel? I feel awful about it. I think it's awful. I think it's terrible. J.P. Moreland brings this out and some of his works in philosophy of mind. I think many of the other reductive physicalist solutions, at the end of the day, they just become eliminativist in what they do to the mental properties themselves. They end up not capturing or saving the reality of mental properties themselves.

Joshua Farris:

But this is, I think in many ways, in the examples that I use in the paper, many of the neuroscientists of the self and consciousness are, whether they explicitly say it or not, or even whether know it or not, they end up adopting a kind of eliminativist approach to mental properties in practice. And one of the key examples that I cite, and I think not an unimportant example, is from the famous neuroscientist, Shaun Gallagher, who's written on self and consciousness from, I guess you call it a neuroscience perspective.

Joshua Farris:

He and Kai Vogele, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that name correctly, they begin their article ironically in this place where they say, "Look, we want to get back to an objective science of the matter concerning matter," I'm using that in a non-technical way, "a scientific understanding of the self and consciousness. And we want to get back to something that's more objective that we can rely on."

Joshua Farris:

And so what they end up saying is, "Well, there's ways we can do this, and we're going to lay out or map out for you how we can do this as neuroscientists that will give us more objectivity and certainty about

these things." And then right up front they say, "Well, what this means we're not doing is we're not doing metaphysics. We're not doing the nasty religious, theological stuff that some people are doing when they talk about souls and stuff like that."

Michael Egnor:

It's like a fish saying that he's not swimming. I mean, you're living in this ocean of metaphysics, and even the denial of metaphysics is metaphysical, so there's no way around it.

Joshua Farris:

Right. Right. Yeah, it is fascinating, the kind of delusions. Maybe they really believe it, but toward the end, they end up citing Daniel Dennett, who is at least in the literature, recognized as being an eliminative materialist of some sort. He eliminates the mental properties of qualia. Qualia is just, I can't remember exactly how he puts it, but either it's a fiction or there's another common set of literature that says it's an illusion. It's not real, in other words. And so they end up adopting a Dennett perspective that is deeply metaphysical in its own right and eliminativist. And they take this just to be the scientific or conditioned perspective, the objective perspective.

Michael Egnor:

The irony, of course, is that Dennett's denial of the reality of qualia, what one has to consider that I'm sure he still uses Novocaine in the dentist's office, that there is an undeniable aspect of qualia of the experience that even a clever philosopher like Dennett can't really make go away. Pain still hurts, and it's not an illusion.

Joshua Farris:

That's right. When you're listening to him talk about these things, it's hard to believe at one level that he really believes this.

Michael Egnor:

But I do have some respect for eliminative materialists in the sense that I think that they have thought deeply enough about the philosophical contradictions or the logical contradictions inherent to materialist philosophy that they have to jettison something. And they're so wedded to their materialism that they won't jettison that, so they jettison the mind instead.

Michael Egnor:

But my problem with Descartes, and it's a problem that goes very deep for me, is I think he caused it. That is that I think the modern mechanical way of looking at the relationship between the mind and the body is a Cartesian error, and the error has been catastrophic for our way of understanding the human person. So I know Descartes struggled mightily to try to overcome this, and people who followed in his footsteps do the same, but it's a problem he caused.

Michael Egnor:

So I really think that getting back to the hylomorphic understanding of reality of matter understood as instantiation rather than as extension in space, and form understood as intelligibility is the best way to get at this, that the soul is the form of the body. It solves a lot of problems.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, that's interesting. I'm not sure which direction we should take. One thing I would say is this, I'm not prepared to give too strong of a critique of hylomorphism at the moment. I'm not inclined in that direction just because I still to this day ... Years ago, I was a Thomist dualist of a sort, and then when I started grappling with Descartes, Cartesianism, and the Cartesians, and especially more lately, the rigorous Cartesian epistemological literature, I started realizing the radical difference between mental properties and physical properties that it seems now to be undeniable to me.

Joshua Farris:

And that creates, well, you might say it creates problems. It certainly creates a radical epistemological dualism that because of Descartes is unavoidable. There are just at least two different ways of knowing that are radically distinctive and one can't really say much about the other. In particular, all these things that we're dealing with, if we were to recognize what was so clear in Descartes, we would realize that neuroscience in some respects has little to say about the actual mental properties themselves and what we can know through various mental ways of knowing, through experience and through first-person reports and first-person ways of knowing.

Michael Egnor:

Well, it seems to me that what neuroscience can say about the mind-body relationship is wholly correlation. That is that a neuroscientist can say that there's a certain pattern of neuronal activity that correlates with a certain kind of mental activity, and that's perfectly valid. There's nothing wrong with that and that's good science.

Michael Egnor:

When scientists attempt to address causation, they are immediately into metaphysics. You can't escape that. And if you're attempting to address mental causation or mental effects from physical causes, you couldn't pick a worse place to start than Cartesian philosophy, which separates the two as completely different substances and then makes up a story about the pineal gland. I mean, it is wrong in so many ways that if one tries to use that metaphysical framework, you lose from the very beginning. You can't explain mental causation.

Michael Egnor:

So neuroscientists, I encourage, have at it. Correlation is a fascinating thing, and that's where all the good neuroscience takes place is in documenting correlations between brain activity and mental states. But once you get into causation, you're into metaphysics, and we need better metaphysics than we have right now.

Joshua Farris:

Well, yeah, I'm not sure if I see the problem of the Cartesians and what they're proposing in terms of causation. I think you're getting at something else and I'm trying to understand it, but there is an interesting inclination or disposition in the philosophy of mind literature. David Skrbina, a philosopher of mind raises this in one of his articles in a collection called Contemporary Dualism edited by Andrea Lavazza and Howard Robinson.

Joshua Farris:

He argues that materialism is wrong-headed. He's clear about that because of the nature of qualitative experience and maybe some other things he would grant that are not accommodated on any sort of materialism or physicalism. "But dualism," he says, is problematic because, well, because there seems to be this underlying intuition that mental properties and physical properties are somehow unified in a monistic way." And so his intuitions lie with monism, even though he's radically convinced that materialism is a non-starter and it doesn't adequately account for phenomenal qualia and things of that sort. It doesn't take the mind serious enough, and so we need something like a monism.

Joshua Farris:

And so I wonder if these are probably where your motivations lie with him. Now, he goes in a more panpsychist direction, but not hylomorphist. But he certainly has that sort of intuition that these things are united in a way that Descartes separated and we need to get back to the unity of the mental and the physical properties. And I mean, it just seems to me that at the most foundational, basic phenomenological level ...

Joshua Farris:

This is something interesting in the case for dualism pointed out by Richard Fumerton that I think is really fascinating and he's making a Cartesian case here. At the most foundational level, the fact that we know things about the physical world, the natural world, the natural processes is because it's already predicated upon this phenomenological standpoint. The fact that we know these things is already mediated by the fact of our phenomenological standpoint in the world, our first-person standpoint.

Joshua Farris:

And without that, we wouldn't know the world and we wouldn't know implicitly that the world and physical bodies themselves are distinct from the phenomenological perspective of which he takes as properly basic within our epistemic wherewithal. And that basic Cartesian idea not only seems to press the metaphysical distinctions between the Aristotelian framework and the Cartesian framework. But even if we don't press that far, it seems to press to this deeper epistemological problem that monism may have.

Michael Egnor:

Of the various monistic ways of understanding the mind and the body, and I really do think that the correct way of understanding will be some kind of monistic perspective, I have quite a bit of sympathy for idealism, particularly for subjective idealism, Berkeley. And in modern philosophy of mind, idealism is often kind of left out. How do you feel about the idealist way of understanding mind and body? Is it a real option today?

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, so I think the subjective idealism, Berkeley's idealism I think is really compelling and it makes a lot of sense and does a lot of work for us philosophically. On the other side of the causation problem from the more epistemological issue, on the other side of this philosophical problem of causation, if there is interaction problem, which I go back and forth. I'm not sure that there is really an interaction problem. Most people think there is an interaction problem if you affirm or assume a substantial dualism of Descartes' sort. And if that is the case, then I think idealism is a much better solution in dealing with the interaction problem between these two radically different distinct types of substances.

Joshua Farris:

I think idealism does a lot of work for us. I think it's elegant. I think it's beautiful. I think theologically it's beautiful because it points, on Berkeley's understanding, it is simply God's mind communicating to us. And so everything that occurs in the world has a sort of integrity already built into it by the divine mind. And so that's beautiful and elegant.

Joshua Farris:

At one level, epistemically, it still is dualistic for us because we're still interacting phenomenologically with the world that we ... And there is at least this empiricist, well, Berkeley was an empiricist. There's this empiricist impulse that, again, going back to Richard Fumerton that he picks up on that there are these two radically distinct ways of knowing that for us cannot be traversed or solved.

Joshua Farris:

I mean, at some highly theoretical way we might say, "Well, they are resolved in the divine mind." But for us, Berkeley was still working with, it seems to me this implicit dualism that Descartes made so clear between these distinct types of properties. That implicit mind-body dualism is still present in Berkeley, but the metaphysics there obviously is different. Idealism is one of those things that it's hard to critique and come to any sort of definitive conclusion about whether or not its metaphysics are right. From an epistemic vantage point, I'm still in the Cartesian world.

Michael Egnor:

Sure. My own perspective is drawn from science, just that that's where I professionally came into these philosophical questions. So I instinctively, for better or worse, tend to think of it in terms of how does science inform our understanding of metaphysics? And I came to Thomistic dualism because in neuroscience, I believe there's a very, very clear distinction between causation of abstract thought and causation of concrete thought. That's a huge topic that we could go into.

Michael Egnor:

But there are lots of experiments in neuroscience that show that brain activity vis-a-vis concrete thought correlates very closely with the concrete thought. By concrete thought I mean perception and memory and sensation and things like that, where you're actually perceiving an object. Whereas, brain activity correlates very poorly with abstract thought, and that falls right out of the hylomorphic Aristotelian Thomistic way of understanding the soul. So that struck me as being very powerful evidence in favor of the hylomorphic perspective.

Michael Egnor:

The idealist perspective I think falls very powerfully out of modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics. Many years ago, I was taken back, I mean, it just took my breath away when it was pointed out that there's no such thing as an individual electron. That is that, for example, when we talk about the mass of the subatomic particle like an electron, we don't talk about the average mass. It's not as if you measured the mass of a hundred electrons and took an average. There is only one mass and electrons cannot be distinguished from one another. You can't put a label on a subatomic particle and follow it around and know it's the same particle a minute later. And that's quite astonishing.

Michael Egnor:

My friend Bruce Gordon, with Discovery Institute, and I have talked about this quite a bit. Bruce is an idealist, metaphysically, and he points out that when you look at the basic structure of matter, when you get down into quantum mechanics, it's all equations. That is, it's not hard little balls flying around. It's concepts. It's mathematical equations. So I think at the most rudimentary level, existence itself is an idea. And even mass itself that comes in with the Higgs boson is still expressed mathematically.

Michael Egnor:

So the way I tend to think of it is that I think idealism is true. I think idealism is a good way to look at. I think all of creation, including us are ideas in God's mind, but God's a Thomist. That is that God structures his ideas in creation in a way that was best understood from the Aristotelian, Thomistic perspective. That's my own take on things.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah. Well, again, I'm very sympathetic to idealism and for the reasons you point out in terms of at its base level, what do we have in physics? Bruce Gordon has argued in a couple of different places that at its base we have information that's predicable of a mind, not hard bits of matter or particles all the way down, or even particles that are mere material. At some fundamental level, there is information and that presupposes a mind.

Joshua Farris:

And I think that's very hospitable in a Cartesian frame, particularly because of his Augustinianism. I think Augustine was an idealist of a sort, but he was a different kind of idealist than Berkeley was. I mean, he was obviously more of a rationalist in his inclinations concerning ideas that exist in the world and frame and shape the world. And so a different kind of idealist, which I'm very sympathetic to. And I think arguably, Descartes could be there as well. That would take a lot of historical work. Obviously we won't go into that, but I think it's a hospitable place for idealism at that level.

Joshua Farris:

I think what you're pointing out about the tensions within Cartesianism are maybe his overall system is globally problematic in that way, but I think more at a local level in terms of the mind and the body relationship and possibly the interaction problem, that there seems to be these insuperable problems that we can't get around if we are Cartesians.

Joshua Farris:

Ironically, at one level, I think it is intuitive because there are these radically distinct types of properties. But at another level, you might say it's not intuitive because there are these types of properties that the Cartesian is assuming that makes it problematic.

Joshua Farris:

But I think there is some, and Cartesians will often give this sort of response. I think they will say that there's often this assumed intentional understanding of matter on the Cartesian system that creates a problem for the Cartesian. The Cartesian says, "No, there's no problem here. It doesn't exist." There is no interaction problem. There are these two distinct types of properties, and that's fundamental to our epistemic wherewithal, and that's where we began. But to presume that there is some sort of interaction problem because there are these two distinct types of substances, well, that's presupposing a problem. It's not clear that there is a problem.

Michael Egnor:

I think the interaction problem can be solved in a rather straightforward way in the sense of Aristotle's four causes. That is that if you think only in terms of material and efficient causation, then you have a problem, then you have an interaction problem with a mental substance and a physical substance. But if you think in terms of formal or final causation, you can understand how the formal cause doesn't involve things moving against one another in a Newtonian way.

Michael Egnor:

The problem though is that what that means is that in order to solve the interaction problem, you have to be a hylomorphist, which takes you out of the Cartesian world. So I think Descartes needs Aristotle to solve his interaction problem, but his metaphysics is a denial of Aristotle. So that's why I think his metaphysics is so deeply misguided is that it takes away the tools that are necessary for even Cartesian metaphysics to work.

Joshua Farris:

I'm not strongly committed, but I don't see the interaction problem. If there is an interaction problem as one Cartesian has put it, it's a problem for all. And if it's a problem for all, then it's a problem for none.

Michael Egnor:

Within the framework of Cartesian metaphysics, how is it possible for a mental substance or a soul substance to interact with a material substance?

Joshua Farris:

I get it at one level, but I don't feel the push of having to reconcile the two. There's just a singular relation between the mind and the body itself, and that's just where we began.

Michael Egnor:

I mean, I struggled with the interaction problem. And by the way, I'm not completely opposed to substance dualism, mainly because I think it is by far the best metaphysical framework for understanding near-death experiences and various mystical ... I mean that screams substance dualism. So I hope idealism will rescue me in that respect.

Michael Egnor:

But yes, so substance dualism I don't think is completely wrong-headed. I think there's a large body of science that gives it some credibility. But I struggled with the interaction problem because I do think it's a problem, and I realized that the Aristotelian four causes is the only way I can think of to solve it. But as soon as you invoke Aristotelian four causes you're into a hylomorphic metaphysics, which takes you out of Cartesian metaphysics. So I can't solve the interaction problem without denying the validity of Descartes' understanding of the world.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I mean, I think Descartes dualism actually at one level does press up against a kind of idealism. So there is a unity there, but that's a deeper metaphysical issue. I would like to see someone work on this. Well, actually my friend who wrote *The Irreducibility of Human Personhood*, he's a hylomorphist himself. He's inclined in the idealist direction. I would love to see the hylomorphism worked out in an

explicitly idealist way. From my vantage point, I think actually Cartesianism works quite well with a version ... At some metaphysical level, it does find a place in a kind of divine idealism that Augustine seems to be committed to.

Michael Egnor:

You could make a case, I mean, and certain people have of course, that Aristotle himself was a Platonist, that they all come from Aristotle. So I don't see the hylomorphic perspective as necessarily not a form of idealism. I think it is. And if my memory serves me right, J.P. Moreland used the term, was it a deep hylomorphism? That is that there's a superficial kind of hylomorphism that tries to explain things acting like billiard balls in terms of hylomorphic theory, but then there's a deeper hylomorphism, for example, that understands matter as pure potency, as pure potentiality. Is potentiality an act rather than matter and form? And on that deeper kind of hylomorphism, I think that's quite idealistic.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, maybe. At the end of the day, I think it's a viable program and project. I think, well, because of the radically distinct natures of substances that furnish a ground for the separability of the person from the body itself, I think Descartes' dualism does a better job. I think also, in terms of the epistemological concerns that are raised earlier about the nature of the mind and the body or properties of the mind and the distinct properties of the body, I think Cartesianism is probably true.

Joshua Farris:

And then there's this whole other question that we're touching upon, and that's the nature of intentionality as being a fundamental mark of the mind or one of the markers of the mind, like privileged access that I think a Cartesian framework, both in terms of his metaphysics and epistemology are a more conducive, hospitable home for those sorts of realities that we seem to have access to when we reflect deeply upon our own phenomenological stances or places in the world.

Joshua Farris:

But I do think maybe the challenge, and I'm not sure if it's a problem, the challenge for the Cartesian would be there is this intuitive, maybe even common sense understanding that the body supplies some sort of information to the mind about the mind. That is maybe a challenge or harder to make sense of on Cartesianism. I'm not sure if it's a problem, it's just harder.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, but my sense is that in order to understand that interaction between matter and soul, you have to go out of Cartesianism. You need metaphysical resources that Descartes hasn't provided. So why stay in Cartesianism? That's been my perspective, is that it seems that, I think it was just a mistake. It doesn't mean that there are not very important and valid things that Descartes said, but his metaphysical project as a whole I think is just misguided.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, no, I understand where you're coming from. I think that's interesting. I'd be interested to hear what you think about the theistic implications from Aristotelianism because it seems to me that the Cartesian framework or Descartes' framework that he's coming from, which is very Augustinian, provides us with a really nice attractive way of thinking about what is fundamental or foundational to the world that has implications for theism itself.

Joshua Farris:

I mean, I'm inclined in that more Augustinian, even Platonic way that Descartes was in contrast to the Aristotelian framework that I think even John Calvin was. He's inclined in these ways more so. And I think that's an interesting line of research and exploration.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, I think what Descartes got right was his Platonism. The Platonic framework, I think is basically correct. And so I think what Descartes got right was to the extent that he was a Platonist, but I think he got a lot wrong and got a lot misguided. And I think Berkeley as people who come at the metaphysics from a Platonic standpoint, was much closer to the truth. In some sense what I really reject is mechanical philosophy is an understanding of nature and of living things as machines of some sort. I think that's extremely misguided.

Joshua Farris:

Some Cartesians argue for this unavoidable Cartesian cogito that we've talked about or talked around. Do you think that Aristotle's perspective ... Well, let me step back.

Joshua Farris:

It seems to me that the cogito that Descartes develops, especially in the Meditations, leads him very quickly to the conclusion that God, the soul and God are so intimately tied together in his framework and his thinking. And really, he just really looks Augustinian here, especially Augustine in the Confessions and things that I think, how do we get at the soul? We get it through the cogito. And that cogito is a clear and distinct idea that we have about the nature of the mind itself and the properties that minds have, that are characteristic of it, that signifies or points us directly to God. Something like what John Calvin in his Institutes picks up on.

Joshua Farris:

At the beginning of the Institutes, he starts having this reflection, and he sounds very Augustinian in that way in that he's saying there's such an emphasis upon the immaterial that is very Platonic that can only make sense in this wider context of God himself. But how we work out that foundational metaphysical level, it seems they're so intimately tied together, which is basically the Cartesian idea.

Michael Egnor:

But it seems to me that Berkeley got at that relationship between human experience or human existence in God in a way that for me is much more satisfactory. That is that with his subjective idealism, the idea that all that exists is spirit and perception, that things exist for us only as perceptions. It doesn't mean that physical things don't exist, but just that their existence is a perceptual existence.

Michael Egnor:

And that way of looking at it, I think answers even questions in quantum mechanics. A very good example is the observer effect in quantum mechanics that an object in nature doesn't exist with defined characteristics until it's observed, that is until you have collapse of the quantum waveform, which appears to be a very solid finding of quantum mechanics, but extremely difficult to understand physically.

Michael Egnor:

However, if we understand all of creation as a perception in God's mind, then even when no human being is observing the moon or any physical object in the universe, that object still exists because God observes it. So I just think that Berkeley takes things to a much deeper and much more satisfactory level than Descartes did.

Joshua Farris:

Yeah, I think those are good points about this the material being somehow perspectively dependent. I would really like to explore more developed Augustinian idealist frameworks and see how well they can accommodate what Berkeley was doing, where they're more rationalist in their understanding, and then Berkeley's of course, more empiricist. The examples you gave do seem at one level to lend credence to Berkeley's idealism over and against the Augustinian framework that Descartes inherited. I'm not sold on it. I'm not overly convinced, but I think I see the evidential weight that I'm sympathetic to on the Berkeleyian view.

Michael Egnor:

This has been an absolutely fascinating discussion, Joshua. I thank you very much and we should talk about more of these things. It's a fascinating topic. So thank you to all of our listeners at Mind Matters News. I've speaking with Dr. Joshua Farris. Please join us for future podcasts. Thank you.

Announcer:

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