

Foundations of the Soul: A Conversation with J.P. Moreland

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Pat Flynn:

Hello everybody and welcome back to the podcast. This is your guest host Pat Flynn. Normally you'll find me over at Philosophy for the People. Today I am very excited to be joined by Dr. JP Moreland. This will be a familiar name, I'm sure to many of the listeners here. He of course, is a contributor to the Minding the Brain Volume. We're going to be talking about the soul. One of the most interesting and important philosophical topics. Dr. Moreland is somebody who's been thinking about the soul and its nature for quite some time, and I'm delighted to finally sit down and be able to have this conversation with you. Thank you so much Dr. Moreland for taking time to be here.

JP Moreland:

Pat, it is my privilege and I'm looking forward to chatting.

Pat Flynn:

So just by way of background, please give us a little personal history. What brought you into philosophy in the first place, and from there, what brought you into philosophy of mind in particular?

JP Moreland:

Good questions. Well, I went to the University of Missouri from 1966 to '70. I was a physical chemistry major and I actually had a full fellowship to University of Colorado to do a Ph.D. in nuclear chemistry. But I came to Jesus my junior year. I think of course, that God can lead people into any field whatsoever but for me, I began to read theology and biblical studies books, and I was drawn to apologetics. And then I began to realize that there was a discipline that seemed to be at the bottom of everything. It looked, first of all, like it was psychology misspelled, but it turned out it was philosophy. So I joined the staff of Crusade and I began to witness and lead guys to Christ and they were getting hammered and so was I by questions. And so I began to study and so on, and eventually I went to Dallas Seminary.

But as good as that was biblically and theologically, it did not scratch my itch for philosophical training because I realized how important it was for us to have Christian philosophers who were faithful to the scriptures and to the Lord Jesus to be a part of the team. The emergence of scholars that loved the Lord and were doing their work in light of his great commission. And the Discovery Institute, I've been a fellow of that for a long time, and I just love those guys. And so I took my PhD in philosophy under Dallas Willard at USC, and I've been teaching and writing since about 1984. And my heart and mind were drawn to philosophy of mind. Part of that was a departmental decision because we had experts in other areas, but I loved it. Anyway. So there you have it. That's a little bit of my story.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. That's excellent. So for people who might not be super familiar, what sorts of questions do philosophers of mind ask and how do you go about trying to answer them?

JP Moreland:

Yeah. Very good questions. Well, it depends on the sub-discipline. In metaphysics. It is what's called an A priori a study of reality. Now that means that it does not rely on sense experience to justify a theory and

use thought experiments. So for example, you might ask the question, what does it mean for something to exist? What is existence? Is there such a thing? And you might ask, what are the different categories? Like biology categorizes organisms from broad to more specific, and philosophers do the same thing. And so are there such things as properties? And if so, what are they? Are there relations? Are they real? And what do they do? And are there souls? And if so, why would anybody believe in that sort of thing? What about free will? What is it? Is it real? Is there a God? And what are the arguments for and against God?

And the other branches of philosophy like epistemology would study things like what exactly is knowledge? Are there different kinds of knowledge? How do you justify your beliefs and gain knowledge? Is the skeptic right? We really can't know anything. Can we know anything beyond science? Also, I did work in philosophy of science. That was an area of competence for me, and that asks philosophical questions about the nature of science itself. So that's a little bit. Ethics is a part of philosophy of course, and logic and aesthetics, but that give you a little bit of a feel.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. Yeah. That's excellent. Not to transition too quickly from the kiddie pool to the deep end, but one thing that I love about your work is you're not just giving isolated arguments for the soul or a particular conception of the soul. And I do want to talk about your mystic-like dualism as we move along, but you do a lot of, I think, very important stage setting with respect to metaphysics and myriology. So why don't we talk about this a little bit. Why don't you talk about why you feel this is so important to try and get your metaphysics right, to try and do important work in myriology before we get to considering say the nature of the human person. Yeah.

JP Moreland:

Thanks Pat. I was invited to lecture at the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland by a research biologist there I'd never met. And they had had John Searle at Berkeley give a lecture there on physicalism, and they had another scholar give a lecture on physicalism. And they wanted someone to come and argue that the consciousness and the soul are real and non-physical. So what I did is I went there and I must've spoken to about 140 neuroscientists and research biologists and I talked for about an hour and 15 minutes, and then we had about a 45 minute or to an hour Q&A session. And I argued ... My first claim was when it comes to the nature of consciousness in the self, what are they? Neuroscience has almost nothing to say about that. These are not neuroscientific questions. All of the arguments for and against these are philosophical.

Now, neuroscience is so ... And I'm so thankful. Is so good at making more precise causal relationships between the self-consciousness in the brain and nervous system. And dependency relations like neuroplasticity implies that if I have brain grooves that are triggering self-talk and thoughts that are making me depressed, that through certain ways of rethinking the content of my thoughts, if I habituate those can re-groove my brain so that it doesn't have a tendency or a habit of causing me to be depressed. On the other hand, allegedly, if your mirror neurons are damaged ... Those are neurons that allow you to imitate something that you see. They were originally studied in monkeys. But if your mirror neurons are damaged, then you can't feel empathy for someone else. And so as a philosopher, I say, well, so what? What follows from that? And the answer is that there are three empirically equivalent theories that are consistent with that data. Now, what are empirically consistent equivalent theories? Two or more theories are empirically equivalent just in case they all entail and are consistent with the same empirical datum. So there is no datum that can count in favor of one of the theories versus

another. So they have to be adjudicated on the basis of epistemic or metaphysical principles like simplicity, explanatory power, and so on.

And so here are the three theories. And this will explain why metaphysics is foundational. The first theory is strict physicalism. And that is a feeling of empathy is the very same thing as a mirror neuron firing. And so when a mirror neuron can't fire, then the feeling of empathy can't be present because it just is a mirror neuron firing. That's the physicalist view. The second view would be called mirror property dualism. And that would be the view that the brain has physical properties, electrical and other kinds of chemical properties. But it also has a range of properties that are properties of consciousness. And those would be things like having a thought, having a sensation, having a belief, a desire, exercising a free will. And so the brain has both ranges of properties.

So when my mirror neurons shut down, they are what cause a feeling of empathy in my brain. And so the cause that I need to activate in order to have that feeling of empathy is not available. And so I can't feel the empathy, even though it is a mental property in the brain that is lacking the cause it needs. Now the third view would be to say that the brain and the soul are two different entities. The brain only has physical properties. It's a material object. The soul is what has consciousness. And so there is a cause-effect relationship between mirror neurons firing and a feeling of empathy in the soul. And so while we're in our bodies, the soul in some way uses our organs, in this case, the brain, in order to think certain kinds of thoughts. Well, in this case then the explanation would be that while a feeling of empathy is in the soul, not the brain, the firing of a mirror neuron on the brain is while embodied an important necessary condition as a cause for me to feel empathy in the soul. And so all three of those theories explain the neuroscientific data, and there's not a single one of them that the data support.

Now, I said that to these neuroscientists during the Q&A. I had no pushback whatsoever on that point which was interesting because I was expecting it. So metaphysics then in summary deals with getting clear on some foundational issues that must be a part of any discussion about things like is there a soul? What is it? Is there consciousness? What is its nature? How does this relate to the brain and all that?

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. That's extremely helpful and I think it's important to acknowledge the empirical adequacy of these three primary contenders here. And where I want to angle next is into some of the, I think, interesting metaphysical motivations for your view, which you call atomistic-like dualism. And we'll maybe work to differentiate that from a Cartesian dualism as we move along. But JP, one thing that interested me in that metaphysical program is how it seemed useful for issues not directly related to philosophy of mind. If you go back to Aristotle, he's positing these explanatory principles of form and matter and so forth because he thinks that there's certain things that are not intelligible without them, namely change, identity through time and stuff like that. And it's just interesting to see how if you sign on with this program, you get these interesting resources that can be helpful later on in philosophy of mind.

JP Moreland:

Boy, you bet, pat. That's exactly spot on. And these have implications or applications throughout a wide range of intellectual issues that we face in life, and they're very practical application. So spot on on that.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah .well please expand on it if you wouldn't mind, and maybe tie it into some of the arguments that you eventually make for the soul. But I'm with you. I think doing metaphysics and trying to get that right is a really helpful first step in all this. Yeah.

JP Moreland:

Well, yeah. A man who may have been the leading philosopher of biology in the 20th century who taught at Northwestern, wrote a book called *The Metaphysics of Evolution*, and he made the point that if naturalistic evolution is true ... And I would also add to that theistic evolution. Then organisms just don't have natures. If you want to group a collection of organisms in a class, then what those organisms that become members of the class have is they resemble one another in various ways. But they don't have anything in common. And if you want to try to talk about a nature, then what you may substitute the historic notion of ... And I'll tell you about that in a minute, with a cladogram, which would just be a branch on the tree of life that you take a point where that breaks off and splinters in a direction. And the beings that evolved leading up to let's say being a dog would be the right class of things that would be a substitute for any of the organisms leading up to that to have a nature.

So there are no natures. And he went on to say, since there are no natures, most of the Western moral and political views hold that our rights and our worth is grounded in the kind of thing we are, our nature. If there are no natures, then those kinds of justifications have got to be taken off the table. They're no longer legitimate. Maybe there's some other way to get value for homo sapiens and other things, but you can't do it by saying they all have a nature in common, humanness and that nature is maybe made in God's image.

Pat Flynn:

Yeah. If I could just play on that for a minute, it's a really important point, and I don't want people to miss it is that a nature is that in virtue of which something is what it is. Right?

JP Moreland:

You bet.

Pat Flynn:

So the idea, and I would argue this is the common sense position, that you are a human in virtue of your human nature, and I'm a human in virtue of my human nature. We have the same nature numerically distinct in us if we're Aristotelians, right?

JP Moreland:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Pat Flynn:

And that does a lot of important work for a lot of common sense things. You mentioned how it helps to ground human equality and dignity, and I think you're right. As soon as you give up that source of real commonality, it's hard to have a solid grounding for that.

JP Moreland:

Oh, it is. It is.

Pat Flynn:

But even beyond that, one of the things that I like that you touch on in your chapter in your book is how we think about what is fundamental with respect to substances. And this was really attractive to me for the Aristotelian worldview of being able to differentiate between mere and aggregates versus what is

really fundamental is substance like me and you and the distinguishing thing that a lot of Aristotelian thinkers seem to pick up on ... I think this is right, and you mentioned it too, is when we seem to switch to something that seems to have a priority with respect to the whole over its parts.

JP Moreland:

You got it.

Pat Flynn:

And boy does that do a lot of work in a lot of areas, but it'll tie into philosophy mind as well. So yeah, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to really emphasize that this is a really important thing to pick up on here. And the implications are vast, really, right?

JP Moreland:

Well, they are. I'm so glad you jumped in. Let me make one more implication and then we can move to where you want to go. It is almost impossible to justify equal human rights if we don't all have something in common that is the same and it's precious. It's got intrinsic worth. Now, if there are no natures, then there's no such thing as human beings all being equally human. We will vary in our humanity depending on our degree of, let's just say the right kind of functioning. So we'll be able to have a self-image and make plans and goals and achieve them, and we we'll have a certain level of IQ and we can be aware of ourselves. If you satisfy those criteria, well then you can be classified a human person. I like to say that half the freshmen at Biola University fail those criteria during finals week.

But the point is that those criteria are what philosophers call degree properties. A degree property like having weight is something you can have to a greater or lesser degree, a non-degree property is you either have it or you don't like being even for the number two. Now, if all these criteria like having a self-image or being able to make goals and plans, we're not all equally good at that. It follows that there aren't no such things as equal human rights. Some of us have more rights than others. And do you remember the student revolt in China in Tiananmen Square where there were tanks that were trying to push the student protesters back? Well, I'll tell you something funny. The Western journalists got all in a tizzy about their violation of human rights. But yet on the other hand, what they say is that we have no right to push our values on other cultures.

Well, you have to see, the Chinese culture doesn't think we have the equal human rights. They think the emperor has supreme rights and those who serve him would be lower in the context. And of course, those that oppose the emperor would have a less rights than someone in favor of him. And so that's the Chinese view. So you're complaining against them about a view that we have in the West and imposing on the Chinese. What's with that?

Well, the obvious intuitive sense is that these people know that we should be treated equally, but their own worldview, most of the people in the media, it's been shown, are secular and agnostic or even atheistic. How in the world are they going to justify equal human rights? That's going to be a tough sell if you don't have humans have in common the same nature, the same kind. Like you said, we all have the same nature in common, but it's of course individualized in me because I'm an individual human and with you, Pat. So that's another application of that point.

Pat Flynn:

That's an excellent point. Thank you for that, GP.

Announcer:

That's all for today. Tune in next week for more on Philosophy of Mind with Pat Flynn and JP Moreland. Until then, be of good cheer.

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