

## *Discovering God and Soul* A Reappraisal and Appreciation for Cartesian Natural Theology

JOSHUA R. FARRIS

*Department of Theology and Religious Studies*  
*University of Bristol*  
*Bristol, United Kingdom*

---

As a piece of ramified natural theology,<sup>1</sup> I seek to rehabilitate a distinctly Cartesian (as a term of art) anthropology that affords us a rich conception of God as a personal mind,<sup>2</sup> which would seem to cohere with the portrayal of God given to us in the Christian Scriptures. Having said this, there has been an aversion for Cartesian-inspired projects, and this is rooted in a tradition of criticism, which includes figures like Heidegger and Ryle.<sup>3</sup> A common criticism is that those following Descartes' train of thought are, in effect, engaging in a Feuerbachian self-projection in which they illicitly impose upon God a superhuman self and human attributes. According to this objection, Cartesian approaches are irrational or inappropriate.<sup>4</sup> I believe that this

---

ABSTRACT: As a contribution to the discussion over ramified natural theology, I put forward a some lines of thought for a distinctively Cartesian variation of natural theology that points in the direction of the Christian God as a mind and as personal. I propose that Cartesian natural theology, as commonly seen in the literature on substance dualism, see the soul as a "sign" or "pointer" to God such that we, as human persons, seem to have access to God's nature and existence via the soul (mind) as a rationale for the world full of persons. On this basis, I respond to a common anti-Cartesian charge(s) from subjectivism and suggest that this approach deserves further consideration concerning theological prolegomena.

1. I am not suggesting that one should affirm everything Descartes says about God, the world, and other doctrinal loci.

2. Additionally, it is important to note that I am not focusing on the recent Thomistic literature concerning anthropology and natural theology, which is interesting in its own right. There is something distinctive about Cartesian approaches, namely mental properties. For a useful treatment of Thomist souls as informing principles of bodies see Charles Taliaferro and Stewart Goetz, *A Brief History of the Soul* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 48. A Thomist approach makes a distinctive contribution.

3. Christopher Insole, *The Realist Hope* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), "The New Apophaticism and the Return of the Anthropomorphic. A shorter version of this chapter appeared in "Anthropomorphism and the Apophatic God," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 475–83.

4. Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989). This is a translation of the second edition, which was first published in 1854; see Van A. Harvey, "Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/>. See especially the section "Criticism of Hegel."

objection (and the set of interrelated objections) does not apply to Cartesian natural theology because there is a misunderstanding of Cartesian foundations to God or overstatements about the Cartesian approach. In the reply to this tradition, I draw from recent Cartesian (as a term of art) dualist literature in the spirit of Descartes and argue that understanding the intimate relationship between a soul and God in terms of the fundamentality of mentality will undermine the concerns the “critics” have about a Cartesian approach.<sup>5</sup> This article is not so much a demonstration as it is a reassessment and appreciation for a distinctly Cartesian approach to ramified natural theology. In order to motivate this, I argue that God is a mind similar to humans. Hence He is a personal mental Being as we have with the Christian God. As a result, the Cartesian has resources to move beyond standard natural theology arguments for generic theism. First, I put forward an initial Cartesian-inspired argument in favor of God as a soul/mind similar to our mental nature. Second, I respond to a common anti-Cartesian objection. Third, I propose that this Cartesian approach has some benefits with respect to theological prolegomena, and offers some fresh motivations for exploring our theological foundations.

### *Defining the Cartesian Soul*

On Cartesianism, persons are identical to souls, or souls are an essential part of persons (where the body becomes a functional part or contingent part of a human being).<sup>6</sup> The soul is immaterial and a metaphysically simple part (not derived from any other parts) that is also distinct from properties.<sup>7</sup> Contrastively, physical objects derive their unity from simpler concrete parts and require a different accounting. As a result the causal accounting and origins of souls opens the door to a theistic explanation.

### *Souls, Causal Accounting, and Initial Reasons to Affirm God*

The nature of the soul requires a cause that is rational and transcends the physical universe. Whilst there are some emergentists who take conscious properties or a conscious subject to be a novel occurrence based on a specified level of complex material configuration, Cartesians, generally, find this

---

5. It is important to note that Descartes, and “Cartesians,” often refer to this thing or entity underlying “cogito,” which can be defined as a conscious thinking immaterial thing.

6. I use “soul” and “mind” interchangeably. The two terms are largely the same on Cartesianism.

7. See Howard Robinson, “Substance,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/substance/>.

explanation inadequate.<sup>8</sup> According to the Cartesian, there is a *prima facie* gap between physical matter and souls such that the former could not produce the latter. Instead, another explanation is required. Simply stated, the soul cannot be built from the ground up. Cartesian souls, then, would require an immediate and/or direct cause that is higher than the physical. Assuming we set aside Humean causation where entities simply pop into existence, then we either have an entity built from the ground up or a causal explanation outside of the natural order. If we have good reason for assuming that souls are not physically produced, then a nonmaterial explanation is required (given the principle of sufficient reason).<sup>9</sup>

The two most likely candidates for explaining persons are either naturalism or theism, but naturalism seems unlikely given characteristic personal properties (first-person awareness, free will, moral awareness, and so forth).<sup>10</sup> The metaphysical explanation for souls seems to be an entity unlike natural causes, which communicates truths about God.<sup>11</sup> Herein, we have resources from a Cartesian anthropology that not only require the explanation of generic Theism, but a more robust conception of Theism, something like Christian Theism where God personally interacts and communicates with humans.

### *A Cartesian-Inspired Argument for Theology*

By way of set-up, my goal is to provide a framework for thinking about Cartesian natural theology for the purpose of responding to anti-Cartesian

8. There is not just one kind of emergentist. In brief, there are emergent property dualists and emergent substance dualists. For the former see Lynne Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Timothy O'Connor, "Emergent Properties," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994): 91–104. For an example of substance emergence see William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1999).

9. Some variation of soul-creation seems most likely (even traducianism with the creation of a first soul). See Joshua Farris, "Emergent Creationism: Another Option in the Debate over the Soul's Origin," *Religious Studies*, forthcoming (2014).

10. There are varieties of naturalism (e.g., atheism and pantheism) and theism. By contrast, there has been a recent move toward arguing for the intuitive idea that God and souls comprise a paradigm. For a sampling see J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM, 2009), 108. Moreland's view is a variation of Thomistic substance dualism, but he shares many intuitions with Cartesianism (see *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*, 128). Also see Charles Taliaferro, "Emergentism and Consciousness: Going Beyond Property Dualism," in *Soul, Body and Survival*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 71.

Whilst I realize that not all theists assume substance dualism (or Cartesianism), it is naturally situated in theism. See Swinburne, "God as the Simplest Explanation of the Universe," *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010): 1–24.

11. Charles Taliaferro, *The Golden Cord: A Short Book on the Secular and the Sacred* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), see esp. 67–72. Taliaferro discusses the relationship between God and souls on page 71.

arguments, yet this is not a demonstration. I assume a Cartesian view and that we have good reasons to affirm human beings are strictly identified with souls (or souls are the essential core of human beings).<sup>12</sup> On this view, persons are conscious immaterial beings in contrast to material beings. This serves as the basis for my coming to understand something about God's nature because of the commonality in both natures, in contrast to the objection from the anti-Cartesian.<sup>13</sup> According to Descartes and Cartesians, the most basic thing we can say about God (if *God* is a proper name with positive content) is that he is a mind(s)—hence person(s). When referring to the mind as basic or fundamental to persons, I mean to say that it is metaphysically and epistemically foundational (that is, brute explanation of persons), which leads me to the soul's relationship to God.

### *Cartesian Souls as Signs of the Divine*

I see the soul as a *sign* or *pointer* to God, using these terms as advanced by Thomas Reid and, most recently, Stephen Evans.<sup>14</sup> Evans, following Thomas Reid, holds that “a natural sign for God ought to be something that is connected both to God and to a human disposition to conceive of God and believe in God's reality.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Evans's externalism construed in terms of belief-producing mechanisms, I suggest something that is closer to a Cartesian tradition. Many substance dualists see the soul as a sign or pointer in and through our conceptual and perceptual “seemings.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, once

---

12. The literature on substance dualism, that is basically Cartesian in character, is growing. See the following sample: John Eccles and Karl Popper, *The Self and Its Brain* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1977); Charles Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Richard Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), see chap. 4. Kevin Corcoran, ed., *Soul, Body and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), see section 1.

There are several arguments in favour of substance dualism from the privacy of the mental, simplicity of the self, the modal argument, first-person knowledge argument, the mereological argument from replacement, and the unity of consciousness.

13. Persons come to have knowledge of God by way of inference or, possibly, by way of a necessary truth that is impressed on the soul by God allowing for other items of knowledge. See Tom Sorell, *Descartes Reimvented* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

14. See C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26–39. I put this forward as a way to motivate an argument. There may be some evidence of something like this notion in Descartes' *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, 3rd ed. (1980; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993): “God, in creating me, implanted this idea in me, so that it would be like the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work” (*Meditations* 3). An argument of this sort will require an article in its own right.

15. *Ibid.*, 34–8.

16. See Roderick Chisholm, “The Problem of the Criterion,” in *The Foundations of Knowing* (Sussex: Harvester, 1982), 61–75. Chisholm develops this notion of “seeming” more fully. Also see Chris Tucker, “Phenomenal Conservatism and Evidentialism in Religious Epistemol-

a person is aware that she is a soul that is inexplicable in terms of natural physical causes, then she has reason to look beyond the physical mechanisms to an outside cause of the soul. This means that by way of having unmediated access to the soul we have implicit access and awareness (*prima facie* justification) to a higher cause (that is, God).<sup>17</sup> Given the above, souls require an explanation of a different sort.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that the soul serves as the basis for “transcendent wonder” and points us beyond the physical framework of mechanistic causes (akin to Swinburne’s “inanimate” or “natural” causes) similar to Evans’s understanding of “cosmic wonder,” one of those remarkable phenomena that “cry out for an explanation.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this higher cause of the soul seems to have some similarity to souls. Thus, we have something beginning to resemble a Cartesian approach to God.

### *Cartesian Distinctives*

What is distinctive about the Cartesian approach to God is twofold. First, Descartes comes to the knowledge of God through the soul.<sup>20</sup> Second, if we are to have knowledge of God (a God like the Christian God) then the most fundamental aspect of who God is must be that he is a soul or mind similar to human minds, which seems basic to all theological ruminating. Without this interpretive grid, we could posit no positive content to God nor have a grasp of God.<sup>21</sup>

---

ogy,” in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, ed. Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 4.

17. Not all Christians agree. For a contrast see Robert George and Patrick Lee, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), see specifically chap. 1.

18. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 303–15.

19. Several authors come to mind. See J. P. Moreland, *Consciousness and the Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2008). See Mark Linville, “The Moral Argument,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), see esp. 442–8. See Charles Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For the discussion on “cosmic wonder” see Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, 60–4.

20. The famous statement “*cogito, ergo sum*,” or I think therefore I am. Implicitly and intuitively, in the process of thinking there is an existing “I,” self, mind, or person having the thoughts. See Descartes’ discussion in the *Meditations* 2. Also see Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chaps. 4 and 6.

21. David Lund, *Making Sense of It All: An Introduction to Philosophical Inquiry*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 93. Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 126–7.

### *The Argument*

My argument is that the world bears certain marks or features pointing to a Being and mind (that is, person), and we come to have this kind of knowledge on the basis of our having access to our natures as immaterial beings.<sup>22</sup> The argument is as follows:

- (1) If I have direct access to my nature as a simple immaterial being that bears one pure immaterial property, and other beings bear marks or features in similar ways, then it is likely these other beings are simple immaterial beings with complex and abstract abilities and properties.
- (2) I have direct access to my nature as a simple immaterial being that bears one pure immaterial property (given introspection, an enduring I-concept, and self-presenting properties);
- (3) and other beings, namely human beings, bear marks or features in similar ways found in premise 2 (given the principle of credulity or phenomenal conservatism).<sup>23</sup>
- (4) Therefore, it is likely that human beings (on the basis of the principle of charity/credulity) are simple immaterial beings with complex and abstract mental abilities (from premises 1–3; *modus ponens*).
- (5) If it is likely that human persons are mental simples with abstract and complex properties and there is not a suitable naturalistic explanation for this, then the likely metaphysical explanation is a mental Being (some call God) with abstract and complex abilities.
- (6) There is no naturalistic explanation for this.
- (7) Therefore, the likely metaphysical explanation for human persons is a mental Being (some call God) with abstract and complex abilities (from premises 4–6; *modus ponens*).
- (8) By logical extension, assuming there is a cause behind humans and the natural world, we have reason (principle of credulity) to think this Being is like human beings because the physical world bears marks or features of a Being with complex and abstract mental abilities (premises 1–3),

---

22. I am working within what has been deemed a Latin/Western and Augustinian approach. See Howard Robinson, "A Trinitarian Theory of the Self," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5 (2013): 181–97.

23. See Richard Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, chap. 3, "Epistemology," section 2.

- (9) Therefore, we have good reason to think that the physical world points to a Being with a mental nature like the one human beings have as the best explanation for persons. This Being many call God.

Let us first take the cogency of the first premise. Why should one agree with the Cartesian intuition that I, as a mind or person, am a simple being with complex/abstract mental functioning? By attending more closely to her mental states it becomes clear that our fundamental or essential natures are simple. One way to motivate this simple intuition is to consider my own persistence through time. Upon reflection, I seem to be the same person when I was five (in 1987) as I am now in 2013. I take it that this intuition is a commonsense intuition that I have no reason to deny. Some may think that I am a material thing, but I can hardly imagine what material thing I might be. There is no garden-variety material object I can point to and say, "that's me." I could be the whole that unifies the material parts, but even still, I can conceive of my losing various material parts (for example, my hand, my leg, or even half my body) and still I would be me. The most likely material object as a candidate for me is my brain. However, my brain is a complex structure of various synapses firing, but I am an entity that has immediate and direct access to my being me (hence it seems that I am not a complex). Thus, a material view of personal identity does not seem to be a viable option.<sup>24</sup> Maybe, I am the collection of my memories or character states. This does not seem to work. On the memory or character view of selves/persons, persons are a complex bundle of properties, but I seem to be a simple that unites the complex bundle of properties. So, I suggest that I am a simple thing that persists through time that also has a complex mental life.<sup>25</sup> I have suggested that my perceptual seeming leads me to believe that I am a simple, which is probably true and accounts for the notion of my persistence through time. Further support for my being a simple can be had in terms of the cognitive access argument to one pure immaterial property.<sup>26</sup>

I suggest that "I" coexist with my thoughts, perceptions, memories and the like. Take the example of my having the thought that I coexist from yesterday's thought that I had to finish this paper, which continues to today that I *still* must finish this paper. Take for example the perception I have of seeing brown instantiated by the desk that I am perceiving at this moment. I see brown. I continue to see brown. This act of seeing brown is something I have direct awareness of through my cognitive states. Perceptions of this sort are not merely co-located bundles of properties that occur but they are had by a thing (that is, substance) of a particular kind. This thing is able to access

---

24. This line of reasoning rules out body/brain views, nonreductive physicalism, and animalist views of persons.

25. I like to think of the soul as a simple that gives rise to a complexity of properties and powers (e.g., a simple that is pluri-potent).

26. See Swinburne, "Personal Identity: The Dualist Theory," in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, ed. Peter Van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

these properties at a time, through time, and at a later time. Thus, I have a nature that is simple with a unified presentation of my thoughts and perceptions.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, I suggest this reveals something deeper that persons can have upon reflection. I suggest persons bear one immaterial property essentially and fundamentally—that is the property of being an individual mind (hence, premise 2).<sup>28</sup>

Take again the example of seeing brown instantiated by the desk. I see brown as I look at the desk for a few seconds. As I am seeing brown, I can reflect on the various qualities I have access to via my mental states. I see that the desk is brown and that it is a certain shade of brown. I realize that some time has gone by and I continue to see brown. Upon seeing brown through time, I realize that there is some thing unifying the brown-thoughts, namely, the I as a substance. At every moment of my seeing brown, I can know that it is I that is seeing brown. Thus, I am the kind of thing that is essentially simple, endures through time, absolute, and metaphysically independent from the objects that I perceive. Furthermore, at every moment that I perceive brown I also bear the property that “I” perceive brown—call these self-presenting properties.<sup>29</sup> A self-presenting property is the sort of property that I have immediately and directly at every stage of my thinking and perceiving. This is not simply an epistemic property but a metaphysical property instantiated by a simple that grounds this epistemic seeming.<sup>30</sup>

One might object and say, “Well, this is simply how it seems to you.” By way of response, I suggest that this perception of the self is so foundational to my perceptual and conceptual states that to deny it would result in grounds for rejecting other beliefs that follow. It is simply not true to say that I am in this epistemic situation such that it merely appears this way, but given the principle of charity/credulity it probably is this way unless we have defeaters for doubting it. I suggest that Cartesians are on good grounds to affirm that persons are simple immaterial beings (premise 2).

Why should one think that, say, other human beings are simple immaterial beings? Once I have discovered my own nature as a simple immaterial thing, it is not much of a stretch to assume that other human beings are the same way given all that human beings share in common (premise 3). I can

27. See David Barnett’s development of this sort of argument, “You Are Simple,” in *The Waning of Materialism*, ed. Robert C. Koons and George Bealer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 161–74.

28. If the argument given shows that I am a basic substance, then the constitution view of persons will not work either. See Lynne Rudder Baker, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 147–56. Baker’s view says that the existence of the first-person perspective is indeterminate (while identity is not; see 152), but on the Cartesian view personal existence is determinate.

29. Richard Swinburne, “From Mental/Physical Identity to Substance Dualism”; see esp. 151–65. Here Swinburne offers a cognitive access argument to one pure immaterial property.

30. See J. P. Moreland on “self-presenting properties” in *Consciousness and the Existence of God* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 41.



discuss the issue with other people to see if they have the same beliefs about their own internal lives. I would then see that they have the belief that they too endure through time, they too have direct access to the notion of an “I,” and that thoughts/perceptions are directly and internally accessible.<sup>31</sup> Given the principle of credulity, I can very quickly (and I do) believe that the more reasonable explanation is that other human beings have the same kind of nature that I do. It must be stated that my coming to justifiably believe this about other entities is different from justifiably believing that I am a soul. I come to justifiably believe through my direct apprehension of self, but with others I come to believe via their physical bodily actions (premise 4).

Moving from human persons to God or the causal agent behind the natural world is related, but a somewhat different issue (premises 5–7). The difficulty is that God or another Divine agent is not embodied like humans are embodied, so we cannot posit precisely the same accounting.<sup>32</sup> However, I would suggest that while this being does not seem to have a body it does bear marks in and through the natural order in a similar way as humans bear marks in their natural bodies. Furthermore, I would suggest that the natural world bears marks and features that reflect an agent/being that has a mental nature (that is, one that is a simple immaterial being with complex/abstract functioning). A mental/personal God would seem to provide a more rational explanation for the universe bearing marks of personal agency than other alternatives, like naturalism for instance. Not only does this agent bear marks of having generic causal powers that brought the natural world into existence, which we know through a cosmological argument for the existence of a Being. This agent bears marks of being the kind of being that must discriminate between options (that is, an individual mind with complex/abstract mental functioning). I suggest that through a variation of the design argument or a fine-tuning argument we have evidence that suggests not merely generic causal agency (that is, a pantheistic being of a sort), but a Being with a mental nature resembling human nature.<sup>33</sup> We have here an argument beyond generic theism pointing in the direction of a personal Designer, as we find with the Christian portrayal of God. Once again, this moves beyond many natural theology arguments to a richer concept of God.

I take it that the natural world bears features of a mental agent with complex and abstract reasoning abilities. Fine-tuning arguments for the existence of God bear this out. Fine-tuning arguments for the existence of a supernatural being (that is, God) come in three forms, namely, the fine-tuning of the laws of nature, the constants of nature, and the initial conditions of

---

31. I am not assuming that persons will be aware of the truth that they are simple beings, but one can apply tests to see if this belief is implicit.

32. However, mind and body interaction could serve as analogy for Divine interaction with the world.

33. Variations of “supernaturalism” might not provide the best hypothesis for explaining the data (e.g., an impersonal Being).

the universe. I consider the first, namely, laws of nature. The laws of nature required for an embodied being (such as human beings) to exist and have a relation to the soul depends upon a Being with discriminatory abilities. For example, the evidence in favor of gravity; gravity being that attractive force between physical objects. Gravity increases in strength proportionate to the masses of objects and wanes with the distance between objects. This long-standing force must remain constant for human brains to develop in evolution and for sustaining minds. Gravity, alone, in all of its manifestations is highly specified and unique to the natural world we live in. Arguably, the best explanation for this occurrence in the natural world is a personal being having complex and abstract mental functioning (granted this Being has greater powers than humans) able to design the world in such a way as to allow complex life to evolve.<sup>34</sup> The uniqueness that the natural world reflects is one that is not only inexplicable in terms of material processes alone, but is unquantifiable in mathematical terms. Uniqueness (as a value) is a feature that is relevant and explicable in terms of persons not in terms of physical processes. Furthermore, consider the design of conscious beings to come to exist in and through evolutionary processes. This too requires a personal being with a mental nature that has intentions and is able to discriminate, devise a plan, and put it into motion.<sup>35</sup> Added to this, there is the problem of uniting individual minds with their neural part. Substance dualist John Foster explains this problem,

Biological life begins at conception, when an ovum and a sperm fuse to produce a new unitary organism. But it is hard to see how this process, or the subsequent development of the organism, could create an additional nonphysical substance and functionally attach it to the organism in the relevant way. The answer, it seems to me, is that we should explain these things by appeal to the creative role of God... it is God who creates the nonphysical subjects and arranges for their functional attachment to the appropriate organisms.<sup>36</sup>

The act of attaching the individual mind to the brain is an act committed by a Being with discriminatory abilities. If this Being has complex/abstract mental abilities and is able to discriminate between various options when creating and designing the natural world with other conscious beings, then it is rational to affirm that this Being is also a simple that is able to unify its complex thoughts. Thus, this line of reason undermines the anti-Cartesian objection, and gives us some justification for affirming Cartesian Theism.

Andrew Pinsent has recently put forward a similar and interesting exploration of how to arrive at knowledge of God as a person. Ultimately, he

34. See Robin Collins, *The Teleological Argument* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 211–12.

35. See J. P. Moreland, *The Argument from Consciousness* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

36. John Foster, "A Brief Defence of the Cartesian View," in *Soul, Body, and Survival* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 29.

concludes that it would be through “signs” or detection of purposive agency, similar to what I argue above, yet Pinsent argues that knowledge of this sort is ambiguous. He concludes modestly, with the idea that only those individuals trained by revelation would begin to detect signs of purposeful agency or personhood. For purposes here, it is important to quote Pinsent on the implausibility of gaining knowledge of God as a person through signs,

Contemporary discussions of whether certain higher animals can be considered ‘persons’ are essentially of the same kind, that is, ethical questions in disguise, and insofar as they give a definition of ‘person’ they tend to fall back on Locke’s identification of personal identity with a distinct persisting incommunicable consciousness. Such discussions do not, however, bring us any nearer to a resolution of the issue of whether God can be considered personal, since God is not a member of our species or any species.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from a line by line response to Pinsent here, I wish to highlight some important items that he along with anti-Cartesians may be missing or, at least, not sufficiently appreciating. First, Cartesians are often lumped together with Locke’s definition of persons. Cartesians (often substance dualists in general) refer not simply to consciousness, but to the immaterial substance not simply a perspective. Second, I am a soul, or I am essentially related to a soul. In contrast to Locke’s view, a Cartesian view has a robust understanding of persons as substantial parts. Having said this, Pinsent is getting to the heart of what needs to be highlighted, namely, an overlapping ground by which to access God’s nature. As I suggest above, humans have an overlap of a property(s) with God. Whilst we do not share in the same species relation as God we do have some ontic overlap with the agent behind the universe. Third, we have a paradigmatic concept of persons in virtue of our individual mental natures. It seems reasonable then along with Swinburne, Lund, and other defenders of substance dualism to affirm the notion that God has a mental nature and is a person. Theism (not simply generic theism), in contrast to naturalism, provides a rational hypothesis that makes sense of mental beings in the universe because God is a mind. Finally, by way of response to Pinsent’s argument that we know God through special revelation alone, one could argue that there is an item of knowledge that is foundational to our second-person experiences of God. Far from being a definitive response to Pinsent, my purpose is to show that there are lines of thought worth considering.

In the end, I believe Cartesians have good grounds for positing that God has a mental nature similar to ours, and this nature we have access to is in contrast to a Feurbachian self-projection. This, then, comprises a basis for thinking about God. What I argue here is that the soul provides content for

---

37. See Andrew Pinsent, “Cosmic Purpose and the Question of a Personal God,” *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 5 (2013): 115.

thinking beyond the self, from the soul to theism (personal theism provides a better alternative to naturalism as a hypothesis), and, finally, God (as a mental Being) provides the best (or likely) explanation for the existence of souls. I posit that anti-Cartesians have reason to value Cartesian philosophy as a viable approach to natural theology (specifically of a ramified sort) in terms of substance dualist anthropology.

### *Responding to Critics of Cartesian Theology*

Insole raises several objections or worries for a Cartesian approach put forth in his recent work, “The New Apophaticism and the Return of the Anthropomorphic,” that is based upon the notion that we can project our experiences onto God. Now, Insole is not the first to raise these concerns nor is he the most committed to these sorts of arguments, but he is a more recent critic.<sup>38</sup> My suggestion has been that soul-substances as persons have an overlap of being and/or properties with the Divine, hence an objective mind-independent frame of reference.<sup>39</sup> Insole, in line with a tradition of critics, argues that both Descartes and Cartesian-inspired approaches (as they are generally construed) are virtually identical to contemporary apophaticism and bear the marks of being subjective, sentimentalist, and romantic. It is important that we understand Insole’s argument specifically as it pertains to subjectivity.

Insole argues that it is not uncommon for Cartesian theologians to begin with a model of anthropology and self-project onto God. Insole articulates the Cartesian approach along the following lines.

- (i) Dwell on a favoured model of the human subject; this model will be a social and political construct, favoured generally by a cultured bourgeois elite. Almost the definition of being a ‘philosopher’, according to this critique, is that the constructed and parochial nature of this model is not acknowledged as such, but is held to be a neutral and accurate representation of the ‘subject’.
- (ii) According to this favoured model of the human subject, draw up a list of the subject’s perfections; thus an ‘Enlightenment’ list will feature properties such as power, control over nature, rationality, benevolence, autonomy and knowledge.
- (iii) To arrive at a correct account of God, simply perform the ‘infinity’ function of each of these perfections. So where Enlightenment-man is rational, autonomous, knowledgeable and benevolent, God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly free and omnibenevolent.

---

38. His purpose in doing this is showing *contemporary* apophatics that they end up doing precisely the same as they charge Cartesians of doing.

39. See Insole, “The New Apophaticism and the Return of the Anthropomorphic,” *The Realist Hope* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

(iv) Proclaim that one has arrived at a thorough understanding of the nature of God.<sup>40</sup>

Insole classifies this as the new anthropomorphism otherwise termed subjectivism—a kind of constructing God in our image. He sees this as a denial of the possibility of our beliefs of propositions about God being mind-independent.<sup>41</sup> Instead, it is more like a Feurbachian self-projection, something contemporary apophatics find utterly gross. Insole proceeds to argue that Descartes and similar contemporary approaches exemplify this sort of argument. Quoting from Descartes' *Meditations*,

By the name 'God' I understand an infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and by which I and all the other things which exist (if it be true that any such exist) have been created and produced.<sup>42</sup>

Insole sees this as an example of the same sort of argument given above. Although one might read Descartes this way, this should be read as a reflection based upon what Descartes has already discovered—namely that he is a soul-substance characteristically displaying conscious properties. Added to this, Descartes is presupposing that he has conscious access to self and to that by which the self must give allegiance to his nature. As Descartes sees it, if we have a concept of the finite, then we implicitly have a concept of the infinite.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, it seems that Descartes is not starting from the self in isolation, but is inferring the Divine as a perfect being by which we explain the self/person. Hence, Insole inverts the metaphysical order and misses the epistemic relation.

One may see this in Descartes when he speaks about both God and the soul in his *Meditations*. In fact, if one were to interpret Descartes as offering an epistemological argument against skepticism, then he does so by way of seeing the soul as a conscious immaterial substance in connection to God. Knowledge of soul and God provides, for Descartes, the foundation to refute skepticism.<sup>44</sup> Instead knowledge of God and soul comprise a basis for other knowledge in the world.<sup>45</sup> The two items are foundational in a Cartesian

40. *Ibid.*, 148.

41. *Ibid.* Insole refers back to the introduction with the desiderata for religious discourse.

42. Descartes, "Third Meditation," *Discourse on the Method and Meditations*, trans. F. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1963), 123.

43. Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 295. Menn persuasively argues that Descartes is following Augustine in isolating the soul and God.

44. Daniel N. Robinson, *Consciousness and Mental Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), "Self-Consciousness," see esp. 144.

45. Husain Sarkar, *Descartes' Cogito: Saved from the Great Shipwreck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), see esp. chap. 6. Sarkar persuasively argues that Descartes held to the cogito as an intuition or basic axiom in his *Meditations*.

scheme.<sup>46</sup> A brief look at Descartes' argument in the *Meditations* will bear this out.

Descartes' overarching project builds upon a foundation that sees the soul and God as a package deal, and this ontology is situated in a rich tradition of development. Descartes' foundation is borne out in the *Meditations* 1, 2, and 3. In *Meditations* 1, he argues that we lack certain knowledge of the body because it is less direct than say the self. In his second *Meditations*, he argues that we have more certain and foundational knowledge of the soul than the body.<sup>47</sup> Descartes in the *Meditations* 3 believes that latent in our conscious awareness/access to the soul we have consciousness of God. As Descartes sees God, he sees God as pure *Nous* that we come to know by virtue of God's creation of us as "nous" (that is, God as creator). It is in this way, in the *Meditations* 3, that the soul becomes an "evident sign" because God is necessarily concomitant to the soul's nature and this idea is cataleptic.<sup>48</sup>

Descartes argues that God is a "rational" cause and an infinite/perfect cause of souls.<sup>49</sup> Descartes maintains,

All these proofs, taken from his effects, reduce to a single one; and also that they are not complete, if the effects are not evident to us (this is why I considered my own existence rather than that of heaven and earth, of which I am not as certain), and if we do not add to them the idea we have of God.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, Descartes argues that God is the first cause of the soul, and that the soul's idea of the infinite is an effect of God's bringing the soul into existence. Descartes argues that,

For, my soul being finite, I cannot know that the order of causes is not infinite, except inasmuch as I have within me this idea of the first cause; furthermore, even if one admits a first cause which conserves me, I cannot say that this is God unless I truly possess the idea of God.<sup>51</sup>

What is important here is that Descartes' notion of God is one that is personal and mental. Through this knowledge of a soul we can know something about

46. Precisely, how he arrives is another question that would take us too far afield.

47. See Descartes, *Meditations* 2, section D.

48. Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 299. Menn utilizes the terms "evident sign," concomitant (meaning the soul-concept is connected to the God-concept), and cataleptic (stative) which are apt for my purposes here.

49. See Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, "Descartes' Substance Dualism and His Independence Conception of Substance," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 84.

50. *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1983), 4:112. Also see Stephen Menn's comments, *Descartes and Augustine*, 264–5.

51. *Ibid.*, 112. See Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 265.

God's essence.<sup>52</sup> Descartes is not the only one who saw the "soul" as a sign whereby we have conscious access to God instead he is one who has carried along a metaphysical tradition that places a primacy on the immaterial as foundational, central, certain, and unitive of persons including God and man. Thus, we have an epistemic relation to God and God provides the metaphysical basis for souls. Hence, the objection from subjectivity (that is, projection) does not apply.

Insole has the same worry concerning Swinburne's approach to theology, in the context of citing Grace Jantzen. Arguably, Swinburne utilizes the same line of argumentation, as seen above, in the following passage,

Imagine yourself [stages i and ii], for example, gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, your thinking being equally coherent however men mess about with your brain [unacknowledged parochial assumption, with perfection perceived as coherently thinking, increasingly disembodied men empowered against both nature and technology] . . . You gradually find yourself aware of what is going on in bodies other than your own . . . You also see things from any point of view . . . You find yourself able to move directly anything which you choose [stage iii] . . . You also find yourself able to utter words which can be heard anywhere . . . surely anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an infinite spirit. So it seems logically possible that there be such a being [stage iv].<sup>53</sup>

Drawing from Jantzen, Insole's worry is that this approach is subjectivist because Swinburne begins with an Anglo-American model of self and projects that notion onto God. However, this does not seem accurate. Instead, Swinburne presumes that we have knowledge of God via the soul. Swinburne also sees disembodiment as a modal property of immaterial entities.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Swinburne sees this as providing further support for the notion that the self and God have an *analogia entis* via the soul and its mental states. Elsewhere in Swinburne's writing on human persons and God he speaks as if these are foundationally connected entities, and he argues for God as the explanation for conscious beings.<sup>55</sup> As this suggests, then, Swinburne does not seem to proceed in such a subjectivist fashion, but presupposes something ontologically foundational. With both Descartes and Swinburne, the soul is a basic "pointer" to the Divine not an Anglo-Saxon model of persons.<sup>56</sup>

---

52. I am thinking for instance of Aquinas's arguments for God or other arguments that argue from cosmology, where it is unclear as to whether we have positive knowledge of God.

53. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 104–5, quoted in Insole, *The Realist Hope*, 149.

54. See Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, 170.

55. See Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 101; and *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed., chap. 9.

56. It will require more argument to ground the objection that both Swinburne and Descartes are using an Anglo-Saxon model of human persons instead of an immaterial substance.

Insole, reflecting the anti-Cartesian tradition, suggests that both contemporary apophaticism and Cartesian theology bear the marks of sentimentalism and romanticism. Sentimentalism is the notion that one is occupied by feelings and emotions that are simply that—feelings. Romanticism is the notion whereby a person creates an object of affection that is comprised of his/her emotional states.<sup>57</sup> It is not entirely accurate to paint the picture that Cartesian methods romanticise/sentimentalise the self.

However, Insole is right to point out the danger that individuals utilizing the Cartesian approach could fall into subjectivism, but it seems this sort of danger is overstated. On Cartesian approaches, it is common, in the substance dualist literature, to place limitations on our speculations about God from nature(s) by way of analogy in terms of degree. What this means is that there is something univocal we ascribe to God, such that by using common language we can speak accurately of God.<sup>58</sup>

These anti-Cartesian worries are clear and deserving of reflection, but include misunderstandings of Cartesian views of humans and God. Instead, I suggest that Cartesian natural theology has a rich ontology that expresses itself in our common sense and intuitions in terms of the soul as having some sort of teleological connection to God. Additionally, this has seen a continuous tradition of thought in the likes of Augustine to Descartes into contemporary times whereby the attempt is a discovery of soul and God whereby Human Persons (HP's) are a model for knowing God.<sup>59</sup>

Some anti-Cartesians have developed a conception of humans in terms of relations, yet relations require a substance with particular consciousness (relations depend on relata). This, then, is in contrast to the subjectivist charge against Cartesians and provides a theological ground worthy of consideration. In what remains, I wish to put forward ways in which this approach provides theological prolegomena that coheres with Scripture.

### *Cartesian Persons and Theological Prolegomena*

What I suggest is that we have knowledge of God and other minds, which serves as a basis and guide for theological reflection. The immediate attractions of this view are clear. First, the soul, as an analogue, provides the ground for our having natural knowledge of God that is re-presented in our common sense and intuitions namely, truths about persons (TP). Second, we

57. Husain Sarkar, *Descartes' Cogito*, see esp. chap. 6.

58. See Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 3 and pages 229–38. In addition, see Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, chaps. 4 and 5 and especially page 229. This is, arguably, Scotus's view. Richard Swinburne, in personal conversation, has stated that analogy by degree should soften Insole's worries.

59. See Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, chap. 6.



have justification for reflecting God in our moral behaviour, mental states, and interior lives (TP). This is so because we are functioning in a framework whereby our natures as persons analogously reflect God in contrast to said views of humans and morality that are Divine arbitrations.<sup>60</sup> Third, we have theological justification for this understanding of HP's in terms of the *imago Dei* spelt out in scripture (language about persons; LP).

There are two questions deserving our reflection. I put these forward as contributory developments to the literature. First, how are we to understand the soul and God in terms of a theological prolegomena? Second, what are some lines for developing this further?

In response to the first, as I understand it, I see this as a substantive view of persons (CP) that must be con-joined with perfect being theology (PBT). PBT seems to have lacked the necessary emphasis on the personal nature of being—concerning humans and God.<sup>61</sup> According to Morris, the deficiency of biblical theology is that it lacks certain “comprehensiveness,” thus it requires filling out and a foundation.<sup>62</sup> For the scriptures to have a comprehensive framework this will require further development in terms of philosophical categories, given the fact that the scriptures do not hand a philosophy of religion to us on a silver platter. Likewise, it will require a framework of personal knowledge. Substance dualism provides this framework such that we have a grid for understanding God and ourselves. Where PBT may do some of the work without a personal framework one is without relational language characteristic of persons. PBT with a kind of Cartesian view of persons via the soul is an augment to doing biblical and systematic theology. This coheres with a reading of scripture.

What might this look like in terms of biblical and systematic theology? I put forward that we have some representative examples in Swinburne's book *Revelation*. He does not codify it in such a fashion, but it is apparent that he is reading scripture with the lens of both PBT and CP. Swinburne, in discussing the rationale for reading God's revelation, sees the model of persons as an assumption we make that is implicit in Scripture. He states the following,

Clearly theology, in talking of God as ‘good’ and ‘wise’ and acting in the world, is using a whole system of person predicates. It is using the model of a person for its talk about God, in the way in which science uses the model of a wave for its thought about light. God is often said to be ‘personal’; and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are described as the three ‘persons’ of the Trinity. But Theology normally makes a very sharp distinction between God and Holy Trinity (and/or each ‘person’

---

60. I am particularly thinking of the works of Brian Davies, *The Problem of Evil*, and Herbert McCabe's work on *God and Evil*.

61. In the perfect being literature, see Thomas Morris and Katherin Rogers. Katherin Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

62. Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 33–5.

of the Trinity—I take this extra clause as read in the remaining passages below where its insertion would be appropriate on the one hand and human persons on the other, which leads me to say not merely that it is claiming that God is a very different sort of person from us, but that he is only a ‘person’ in an analogical sense).<sup>63</sup>

It is important to note that Swinburne is not assuming analogical in the sense that it borders on the equivocal, but analogical in the degreed sense based upon natural knowledge. Importantly, Swinburne discusses the notion of revelation in terms of God as both a perfect being and a person. He states the following,

So we need to talk about God not merely with the model of a person (in the sense in which humans are persons, particular substances) but with some other model—for instance, the model of a supreme form or essence, or the model of a law of nature, which is the law it is because of the powers it involves. Rather, we need this sort of model of God as a Form or Law to qualify the model of God as a person (in the ordinary sense), in the way in which the particle model qualifies the wave model of light, to give us our limited understanding of what God is like.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, all of the knowledge that we have via revelation is through personal and experiential knowledge, as Swinburne states in *The Coherence of Theism*.

That God is a person, yet one without a body, seems the most elementary claim of theism. It is by being told this or something that entails this (e.g. that God always listens to and sometimes grants us our prayers, he has plans for us, he forgives our sins, but he does not have a body) that young children are introduced to the concept of God.<sup>65</sup>

According to this statement, Swinburne is pointing to the basicity of this belief that we have conscious access to the nature of God, which is important for theological method. Principally, we have a grid for understanding God (as perfect and personal). All of this follows naturally from substance dualism whereby persons just are immaterial substances with a metaphysical explanation in God. Thus, Cartesian theology provides a foundation and guide that is comprehensive.

Practically speaking this provides a framework to read Divine revelation not simply as that which human authors compose, but as a *Divine* revelation. This means that when we read of God choosing to do something we can know that he is making a volitional choice that corresponds to our doings. We can know that when it speaks of God having mental states and emotional states toward us that he really is doing just that. Realism with respect to

63. Swinburne, *Revelation*, 232.

64. *Ibid.*, 233.

65. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 101.

---

persons where God and humans comprise the foundation provide us with the theoretical resources to know and speak about God. This is no small matter!

### *Conclusion*

In this article, I reassess the merit of Cartesian anthropology for ramified natural theology. I have shown that proponents of Cartesian natural theology have resources to develop a rich conception of God as a person. On this basis, I argued that it is inaccurate to charge Cartesian approaches with self-projection. Finally, I have put forward lines of reasoning following from this ontology for further consideration concerning theological prolegomena.<sup>66</sup> In the end, we have reason to consider Cartesian anthropology and natural theology more seriously.<sup>67</sup>

---

66. This will require further development and argumentation. As it stands, naturally connected to my response to anti-Cartesians, I put these thoughts forward as lines of reasoning for further development.

67. Thanks to Richard Swinburne and Christopher Insole for their personal correspondence through e-mail. Additionally, thanks to Scott Prather, Mark Hamilton, James Arcadi and Oliver Crisp for conversing over the topic of an initial first draft. A special thanks goes to Chad Meister, Charles Taliaferro, and Omar Fakhri for their comments on the set-up section. Finally, thanks to Angus Menuge and Joseph Gorra for comments on the final draft.