Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Dean, I want to talk about the soul. Now I'm not telling you that I believe in it, but if I did believe in it I'd like to know what it is. I know theologians give lots of imagery, and philosophers frankly, they don't really talk very much about it because most of them don't believe in it.

Dean Zimmerman:
That's right, that's right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
So as a philosopher, how you begin to describe the soul?

Dean Zimmerman:
Well there's a...there's a whole bunch of alternative views about the nature of the soul that are sort of out there. I think you can sort of explore them abstractly. At the end of the day what you want to know is why should you believe in a soul, and then you look at these various models and see which of them satisfy the desiderata, you know. So, but if you're just looking at the alternatives that have been offered, there's a whole spectrum of positions. One of the big divisions I think... Well so...I would call any view substance dualism if it posits something that has mental states or is crucially involved with my having mental states, and it doesn't have very much in common with the stuff that ordinary non-thinking objects are made out of. So if you're forced to posit a different extra kind of stuff in order to...in order to have thinkers, then you have a kind of dualism. Now there's a spectrum of views because you might make that stuff, you might say that it's very, very different from ordinary matter, or you might say that it's...it's kind of like ordinary matter but just a little bit different.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
How would the characteristics be in both of those conditions?

Dean Zimmerman:
Well so you look at ordinary stuff and it's obviously in space, it's in time, it's made out of little bits that have mass and charge and various other properties that you can measure. And it's concrete in a sense. It's not...it's not...it's not abstract, out there in, you know, platonic heaven or something like that. Now the most extremely dualistic view would say I'm so unlike that stuff that I'm...not only do I not have mass or charge, not only am I not in space, but I'm not even in time. What's more, I'm not even a concrete entity, I'm abstract like a property, or an essence, or a number or something like that. Now that's a crazy view. Now some people have said things that almost seem to imply it. So sometimes you'll hear people say I'm the program that my body runs. Well a program is an abstract thing that can be instantiated in many forms and you can write it down on paper, you can think about it but never run it, right? So if I'm...if I'm like that, then I'm an abstract object of some kind. Others...you know because that's a crazy view. So other...others have said I'm outside of time and space, but I'm a concrete contingent entity. The most common sort of dualism, made famous by Descartes, is a dualism where I'm in time, I have mental episodes one after the other and they happen simultaneously with various episodes that happen to my body, but I'm not in space, and somehow this non-spatial thing gets hooked up with a body. But there have been other dualists who have said no, in order for this soul to get hooked up with this body, and that soul to get hooked up with that body, they have to be somehow differentially related, you know. They can't all just be in one place as it were outside of space. They have to be linked up spatially to the different bodies. So my soul is operating somehow in here and yours is in there. And some have posited further similarities between these...these mental things and bodies.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Do souls have parts like we have parts?
Dean Zimmerman:
Yeah, so when you look at what the spiritualists of the 19th century thought, they posited a kind of ectoplasm. In fact they could sometimes produce it in the...in the séance. It bore a striking resemblance to liver I think. But they thought that the thinker is an immaterial thing which means it's not made up out of this kind of stuff this is made up out of, but it's extended, it's kind of like a body, right? And it has inner states that somehow mirror the ones here in this...in this body, and it can...could presumably come apart. Now I think all the reasons I can think of for being a dualist do not require that. In fact they point away from that. So the reasons I think there are to take dualism seriously is...is that I take myself to be a very precise thing. I take it that there's a definite fact about whether I'll survive the destruction of this body, and I take it there's only one of me. And, if you look at this body it's a vague kind of thing that sort of ceases to exist gradually. I mean by...by normal timeframes, our timeframe, we die suddenly. But if you look closely, it's a gradual process and dating it, you know, trying to find an instant when I cease to be would be silly really because it's a...it's a vague messy thing that just gradually ceases to be. And similarly, trying to find the precise boundaries of my body is...is silly. There's bits of skin flaking off – when exactly do they cease to be part of my body, when does this... this hydrogen atom become part of my body after I've absorbed it? Those...there's no answer to those questions because it's a vague thing, like a cloud. On the other hand, I think I'm a precise thing. Now maybe I'm wrong about that, but it would be very strange to treat myself the way I treat a cloud or some other vague thing.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
So what does that imply about a soul if one exists? I mean does it have parts? Are there component things?

Dean Zimmerman:
It shouldn't be vague. It shouldn't be... It shouldn't... It shouldn't be the sort of thing that can gain and lose parts rapidly, or then it's just another thing like the body. I mean my basic problem with supposing that I'm identical with this thing is that I believe that these qualities, these phenomenal states are something extra and there have to be laws of nature about their generation. I don't think fundamental physical laws, these are going to be fundamental mind/body laws, but I don't think fundamental laws can be about tables, or chairs, or clouds, or organisms either – they're vague macro-physical things. They're not going to show up in the fundamental laws. So if there's fundamental laws about consciousness, they shouldn't be about vague things. And so I think there's a genuine possibility that they're about an extra thing that comes with consciousness. So just like when you create a particle by some, you know, by bombarding some particles, you generate a new property that wasn't there before; you generate a subject with it. So when a brain gets in the right sort of state, it may generate consciousness and generate a subject to go with it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Does that have any implications on whether that soul will survive the death of the body? Because one, I could think, could argue it both ways.

Dean Zimmerman:
No, it doesn't. I don't see that it has any consequences. So in fact...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Because most people assume that it would. Once you get to a soul you're automatically...

Dean Zimmerman:
You're home free.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Yeah right, right, you got it forever.

Dean Zimmerman:
Yeah.
Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
But it's not from the precision by which you define it, it is a completely new fact that you have to deal with.

Dean Zimmerman:
Right. So if you think there's souls because you think brains generate consciousness, consciousness needs a new subject, well this new subject was generated by a brain so maybe it remains radically dependent upon the brain. Certainly I think – unlike Descartes and lots of earlier dualists – we've got really good reason to believe that my ability to think and function mentally at all depends massively upon the proper functioning of this brain. I'm...I can't think without it. Take it away, presumably I can't think at all. Perhaps take it away and poof, I just cease to be.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
But yet that soul, if one is there even under that condition, it may remain, it may not remain, may be conscious, may not be conscious. If you believe in a soul, which I'm not saying I do, but even if you do you still have not solved your ultimate problem. It's one step maybe.

Dean Zimmerman:
Yeah. The question...the question is now on the table: could I survive without a body, right? That question is a live one now. Given that the soul as I'm thinking about it is something that's a part of the natural order, it's generated when brains generate consciousness, the question of whether it just – poof – goes out like a candle when the brain stops functioning, well that's a good question. Now if you're a theist you've got reason to suppose that even if the soul would naturally go away, God might miraculously want to keep you around. And of course the orthodox view about persons and souls is, you know according to Christian theism anyway, is that souls naturally have bodies and...and that they're going to get bodies again. So it's an unnatural state for a soul to be in for God to be sort of sustaining it without its body.