

Response to John R. Searle's "The Future of Philosophy"

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IN HIS ILLUMINATING ARTICLE on the future of philosophy, Professor Searle touched on a number of issues. I will consider just two of them here: the mind-body problem and the philosophy of science.

The Mind-Body Problem

One thing that struck me in the way that Professor Searle frames the mind-body problem was his emphasis on wholeness. He admonishes us to remember "the fact that we live in one world, and all the features of the world from quarks and electrons to nation states and balance of payments problems are, in their different ways, part of that one world."

The world is one, and each human being is also one, particularly in the experience of consciousness. Given this oneness, Searle criticizes neuroscientists who pursue what he calls a "building block theory of consciousness"—which views "our conscious field as made up of various building blocks, such as visual experience, auditory experience, tactile experience," and so on, and then seeks to put the blocks together. As he says: "conscious states always come to us in a unified form. We do not perceive just the color, the shape, or the sound of an object; we perceive all of these at once simultaneously in a unified conscious experience. The subjectivity of consciousness implies unity."

If the world is one and human consciousness is one, it might seem appropriate in our account of these to begin with unity rather than plurality. Rather than start with the part and construct the whole, it seems fitting to begin with the whole and then, from that vantage point, to consider the part.

To begin with unity, we have to overcome the dualism that still seems to haunt our thinking. As Searle rightly notes, “the first step on the road to philosophical and scientific progress in these areas is to forget about the tradition of Cartesian dualism. . . . Just as Einstein made a conceptual change to break the distinction between space and time, so we need a similar conceptual change to break the bifurcation of mental and physical.” I think that to break the Cartesian bifurcation, we must see all aspects of the human being within the context of the whole.

Despite his desire for wholeness, however, Searle still seems inclined to start with the part. We see this in the fundamental question he poses for science: “How exactly [do] neurobiological processes in the brain cause conscious states and processes and how exactly [are] those conscious states and processes realized in the brain?” It is assumed that the part (the neurobiological processes) are causing the whole (human consciousness). Even in his rejection of the building block approach to consciousness, Searle still seems inclined to put the part before the whole. As he says, “My hypothesis, then, is that looking for . . . building blocks is barking up the wrong tree, and that we should instead look for the correlate of the unified field of consciousness in massive synchronized patterns of neuron firing.” Of course, the patterns of neuron firings are again parts, in terms of which the whole of consciousness is to be understood and explained.

How do we get to wholeness? The dialogue with theology might be useful at this point to help us get a handle on wholeness. While we would not want to import theology as such into science or philosophy, its insights into wholeness might be helpful.

Genesis tells us that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” We begin with the oneness, the unity, the wholeness of God, but immediately we proceed to distinction. God creates a world that is other than God. There is distinction, but no disruption or bifurcation. There is distinction, but also unity, between the goodness of God and the world that God finds to be “very good” (Gen 1:31). The world has many parts, but these are, again, one in the harmony of their interrelationships, reflecting the oneness of the wisdom of the Creator. So, wholeness need not imply sameness; even within unity, there is room for distinction.

Genesis also recounts the creation of humankind, made “in the image” of God (Gen 1: 26–27). As God is one, so the human person is one—although the unity of the human being again involves a multiplicity of parts. As God is wisdom and love, so the human person is

capable of knowing and loving. As the one God, in the fullness of revelation, is manifested as triune, a unity of three distinct persons essentially related to one another, so the human person is no solipsistic individual, but a being whose very nature is communal. As God himself observes: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18).

Perhaps the philosophical lesson here is that wholeness does not mean sameness and need not imply lack of distinction or absence of relationship. In fact, if relationship is an essential aspect of the human person, we might be suspicious of a philosophy that begins its account of human nature with an isolated, individual consciousness: "I think therefore I am." History has shown that this leads to the dualism and bifurcations that Searle rightly rejects: "The single most important obstacle to getting a solution to the traditional mind-brain problem is the persistence of a set of traditional but obsolete categories of mind and body, matter and spirit, mental and physical."

I think that the way to overcome such apparent metaphysical dualisms is not simply to choose one pole over the other. This is unfortunately what Searle seems to do, reducing the mental ontologically to the physical: "The first step on the road to philosophical and scientific progress in these areas is . . . to remind ourselves that mental phenomena are ordinary biological phenomena in the same sense as photosynthesis or digestion."

I think that such dualisms are better overcome when we begin with the wholeness of the human person and develop a philosophy or, more specifically, a philosophy of nature, that can recognize the different aspects of the human being (including the material and the spiritual) and incorporate the established findings of empirical science—all without forgetting the fundamental vision of human wholeness. For this task, I would suggest that the hylomorphism of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas might prove a promising starting point.

The Philosophy of Science

On the philosophy of science, Professor Searle's fundamental concern is the philosophical challenge posed by quantum mechanics: "I regard it as a scandal that philosophers of science, including physicists with an interest in the philosophy of science, have not so far given us a coherent account of how quantum mechanics fits into our overall conception of the universe, particularly with regard to causation and determinacy." He sets this as a task for philosophy today: "I think that it is the most exciting task of the twenty-first-century philosophy of science . . . to give an account of results of quantum mechanics that

will enable us to assimilate quantum mechanics to a coherent overall world view.” Having paged through many popularizations of quantum mechanics and seen how they often mystify rather than clarify that science, my theological response to Searle’s philosophical proposal is simply a resounding, “Amen!”

Searle also critiques Thomas Kuhn’s view of science. I agree with his critique and believe that it can give us an opportunity for a brief review of Aquinas’s account of the methods of science and theology. Searle says:

It is characteristic of Kuhn’s book (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) that he implies . . . that the scientist does not give us truths about the world, but gives us a series of ways of solving puzzles. . . . He seems to imply that we are not getting progressively closer to the truth about nature in the natural sciences; we are just getting a series of puzzle-solving mechanisms. The scientist essentially moves from one paradigm to another for reasons that have nothing to do with giving an accurate description of an independently existing natural reality.¹

The basis for Kuhn’s views is not hard to find. He must maintain that science cannot be getting us any closer to the truth about nature as such, since, for him, there is no such thing as “nature” or “truth” independent of the theories of science:

We may . . . have to relinquish the notion . . . that changes of paradigm carry scientists . . . closer and closer to the truth. . . . A scientific theory is usually felt to be better than its predecessors . . . because it is somehow a better representation of what nature is really like. One often hears that successive theories grow every closer to, or approximate more and more closely to, the truth. . . . There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like “really there”; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its ‘real’ counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle.²

¹ John R. Searle, “The Future of Philosophy,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 14.2 (2016): 555.

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 170 and 206.

If, unlike Kuhn, we admit the objective reality of the world that science studies and of the natures of those things that science describes through its models and paradigms, we will be able to affirm that the succession of more adequate models does indeed increase our knowledge of nature. William Wallace explains this as the tradition of Aquinas:

The thesis that underlies Thomistic methodology . . . is that science is concerned with a study of the real . . . and that real entities can be the subject of true existential predication, that they have natures that can be understood, and that there can be progress in this understanding. Much of this progress comes about through the continued application of modeling techniques, which make new existential claims possible and enable scientists to preserve their generalizations, while modifying them and interpreting them in terms of an ever-deepening understanding.³

It is rather remarkable that Aquinas himself recognized the role of models in our account of nature and saw how one model might replace another. He noticed that none of the models fully captures the reality that it is intended to represent. Still, the succession of models can lead us toward a greater understanding of that reality, though never fully grasping it. Even more remarkably, Aquinas believed that this was not only the situation of science with respect to the reality of nature, but also of theology regarding the reality of divine revelation. Theologians also employ models to try to grasp the depth of the intelligibility of revelation, but none of the models can wholly encompass what is revealed. In his usual style, he says this quite succinctly, using the example of astronomy:

Reason is employed in another way, not as furnishing a sufficient proof of a principle, but as confirming an already established principle, by showing the congruity of its results, as in astronomy the theory of eccentrics and epicycles is considered as established, because thereby the sensible appearances of the

³ William Wallace, "Causality, Analogy, and the Growth of Scientific Knowledge," in *Il cosmo e la scienza*, Atti del congresso internazionale Tommaso d'Aquino del suo settimo centenario 9 (Naples, IT: Edizioni Domenicane Italiane, 1975), 40.

heavenly movements can be explained; not, however, as if this proof were sufficient, forasmuch as some other theory might explain them. . . . [In this way] reasons avail to prove the Trinity; as, when assumed to be true, such reasons confirm it.⁴

To speak syllogistically, we might say that, in this account of the method of science, we begin with a conclusion: the actually observed motion of the heavens. We then reason backwards to construct premises for that conclusion. But the premises involve a freely invented model (for example, eccentrics and epicycles). The model may not (and probably never will) provide the proper reason for the conclusion, but it can contribute to our understanding. Ptolemy, for instance, did not discover the way that the heavens really move, but he did provide a model that allowed astronomers to better understand and predict such motions.

Like scientists, theologians also use models—not to penetrate the truth of nature, but to better understand the truth of revelation. Their models, of course, are utterly inadequate—something like holding up a candle to get a better look at the sun. Truths of revelation, such as the mystery of the Trinity, infinitely exceed our human understanding. We accept them on faith—and yet faith can seek understanding through reasoning, and reasoning employs models.

The models of human reasoning that theology employs are far richer than the epicycles and eccentrics of Ptolemy. Augustine, for instance, employs the model of human knowledge and love to penetrate the mystery of the Trinity. And we might say that, beyond that model, he is also employing the broader model of Platonic philosophy to formulate his account of human knowledge and love. Similarly, Aquinas will employ the model of Aristotle's philosophy of immanent motion in his theology of the Trinity. Meantime, St. Patrick will simply hold up a shamrock as a model to elucidate the Trinitarian mystery for the people of Ireland. None of the models gives us the proper reason why God is one and three, any more than Ptolemy's model provided the proper reason for the motion of the heavens. Yet each does in some way illumine the truth of revelation, even as it leaves the depth of the unfathomable mystery unknown. N·V

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).