Review of “Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence”

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The way one sets up a problem will determine much about the type of answer one gets. In metaphysics and epistemology as anywhere else, one’s basic choices in envisioning and articulating a problem will significantly affect one’s approach to the problem as well as one’s results.

This thoughtful study by John O’Callaghan challenges some of the commonest assumptions of contemporary philosophy in setting up the problem of how words express what we understand about things. In particular, he engages the assumptions that have regularly been made ever since what Richard Rorty has called “the linguistic turn,” the view that philosophical problems are really problems of language that are best dealt with either by returning language to some ideal form or by paying more attention to ordinary language usage. Holding “traditional philosophy” to have erred in assuming the existence of a realm of objects “in the mind” that are the bearers of “meaning,” this critique claims to find unanswerable the objection that one will never be able compare these internal objects with their external counterparts. Any possible comparison that one would ever entertain would only be a comparison between one mental object and another, and in this way one will never be able to get outside the mind. Better, say the proponents of the linguistic turn, to focus on the public character of words and language and to forget any mental realm of meanings.

By bringing to bear a considerable dexterity with the tools of contemporary analytic philosophy as well as a rich understanding of what traditional Thomism means when it claims to espouse a robust “realism,” O’Callaghan tries to challenge the assumptions of those who make the linguistic turn. He focuses in particular on Hilary Putnam’s philosophy of mind and theory of language. At the same time he aims to correct what he perceives as the shortcomings of various “analytic Thomists” (whom he regards as having given away the game by their choice of starting-point) even while he tries to offer to the broader philosophical public an alternative to the old battles between empiricists and skeptics by reflecting on the embodied status of human consciousness.

A distinction crucial for basic Thomist epistemology and central to its articulation of many other advanced questions in that field is the distinction between id quod and id quo, between that which is known and that by which something is known. For the Thomist, concepts are not normally the objects of knowledge, but are the means by which we know whatever we know about things in the world. Except in those cases when we are inquiring about the status of what we know and are
making our concepts the direct object of reflection, as professional philosophy often needs to do, the Thomist envisions concepts not as what we know, but as that by which we know. This posture allows for a different starting-point on the question of how language maps onto the world, for it need not presume an isomorphism of the relation between language and concept with the relation between concept and entity.

If one were to take either sense-impressions or concepts as what we know rather than as that by which we know whatever we come to know, it is easy to see why the resulting epistemology tends to be subject to severe problems. One will be faced with the problem of how to bridge the gap between some external entity and whatever is in the consciousness of the knowing subject. One will be stuck with comparing one set of appearances with some other set of appearances and will have no way out of consciousness to things. Whether one opts for the Cartesian search for certainty, resorts to Humean principles of association in the face of skepticism, or risks phenomenological solipsism, any claim to philosophical realism such as Thomism makes will invariably seem naive. O’Callaghan carefully recounts the attractions of adopting some sort of “critical” position and the advantages that beckon from making the “linguistic turn” before making his case for Thomistic realism.

To gain a deeper sense of the entire problem, O’Callaghan roots his discussion of these various proposals in a lengthy discussion about the various interpretations that are possible for an important passage in Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* (namely, 16a3-9). This text offers the classical locus for discussions about how language attaches to the world. It contains what O’Callaghan labels Aristotle’s “semantic triangle,” namely, (1) the articulated sounds of language that are “signs” of (2) the “passions of the soul,” which are “likenesses” of (3) things (objects in the world). Mindful that written language might seem to add a fourth facet to this discussion, Aristotle notes in passing that in relation to oral speech the marks involved in any form of writing have the relation of sign to signified. Over the centuries Aristotle’s commentators have found this fourth relationship fascinating in its own right, but in some ways less problematic than the relationships that constitute the basic semantic triad of words, concepts, and things.

One recurrent tradition of interpretation tends to treat the relation of thoughts to things as roughly comparable to that of words to thoughts, as if both were instances of a relation of a sign to what it signifies. In this basic interpretation there are in turn two possibilities: either both or neither of these relations can be envisioned as involving some sort of likeness. But to say that articulated words are really “like” thoughts just as thoughts are “like” things quickly tends to break down under analysis; this does not account for words in any one language that have the same meaning, nor for words in different languages that are totally unlike each other in sound but that have the same meaning.

But even if one holds that languages are largely conventional by the imposition of meaning on terms, this does not settle the question about whether our “thoughts” are somehow “like” things. Many philosophers have posited that there must be a realm of concepts in the mind as bearers of meaning, but Wittgenstein and others have brought suspicion against treating thoughts as “mental representations” for a variety of reasons. The preference of individuals like Putnam who have then made the linguistic turn on this question is to focus on the public character of words so as to avoid the perils of representationalism.
To O’Callaghan, however, this recourse to the public character of words begs the question of how the mind is supposed to gain access to the extra-mental world. Such a position seems unfairly to claim that we have some privileged access to one class of physical beings in the world (for the public aspect of words and language refers to their physical presence with measurable duration and volume, whether oral or written) as a way to mediate our cognitive relation to the rest of the physical world to which we have no such access. But if the mind has no direct access to the physical world and needs to have some kind of mediator, words and language cannot provide this service any better than any other physical object.

As an alternative to the notion that in either both or neither of the relations one will find some sort of “likeness,” O’Callaghan prefers the Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle for its stress on the point that the original text only speaks of a likeness between the “passions of the soul” and things and that it does not speak of “likeness” but of “sign” to articulate the relation between words and concepts. At considerable length he explicates Aquinas’s view that words can only come to have an attachment to reality as conventional signs of what they signify because our cognitive powers are embodied.

For Thomas the intellect has both an active aspect and a receptive aspect. The active dimension of the intellect should not be understood as “constructive” of its concepts but as engaged in the “discernment” of forms; the receptive dimension of the intellect (what the Aristotelian tradition likes to call “potential intellect” or “passive intellect”) refers to the ways in which the mind itself is changed by what we are coming to know. It is for this reason that Aquinas stresses the “passions of the soul” in Aristotle’s text, and with Aristotle he repeatedly asserts that the mind becomes what is known – not by some “substantial change” in which the knower would cease to be a human being but by a modification of its own proper potentiality, by intellectually taking into itself the forms that structure the objects that we come to know.

What makes such an arrangement possible for Thomas, of course, is the metaphysical stance of hylomorphism. If one were to envision the setting for the problem of how language maps onto reality in the context of a materialist reduction of mind to matter or of an irreducible dualism of mind and matter, the problem remains insoluble. Dualisms invariably produce the unbridgeable gap that precludes ever getting beyond the comparison of one state of consciousness with another. The reduction of mind to merely a particular arrangement of matter always has trouble accounting for meaning at all.

What the Thomist requests, by contrast, is that one start by acknowledging that there is such a thing as genuine knowledge and then proceed to ask how this is possible. The answer that the Thomist proposes is that there must apparently be something as spiritual as mind already embodied as a power or faculty of the same structural principle (the soul) that is animating the body, or else one would never know anything. The mind should not be conceived as a separate substance in some dualist relationship, but as a power of one and the same soul that animates the body; further, it is crucial that the mind be regarded as receptive to reality even before it commences activity in its own right. In this way Thomas can make his claim that we human knowers can know objects in the world without creating, controlling, or altering them in the very process of knowing. The actions of the body, including the words and language with which an individual comes to express what the mind comes to know, belong to the means by which the corporeal expresses the spiritual.
It is this point that brings us to the significance of the book’s subtitle: “Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence.” Thus far we have focused entirely on the problem of how language maps onto things, but the argument of the book at this juncture also points toward some important practical considerations. By reflecting on the kind of activity that knowing is (namely, becoming like what we know, intellectually taking on the forms of other things without losing our own distinctively human form), we can recognize the way in which we increasingly transcend the material dimensions of our existence and resemble a “more perfect form of existence” that entirely transcends our limitations, the transcendence of God, who knows all by having made all there is to know. And within the space of our interactions with one another, it is the unique capacities of being able to map language onto the world that makes it possible for us to enjoy a “more perfect form of existence” by our ethical and political choices.

In short, O’Callaghan’s volume commits the bulk of its energies to constructing a sustained argument about the deficiencies of prevalent patterns for approaching the problem of how words express what we know about things. In proposing an alternative explanation, he attempts to fill in those deficiencies by a richer metaphysics. And on the basis of the richer explanation he has proposed, he can point to various levels of benefit that can accrue.

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