THE PHYSICAL MIND DEBATE

Proceedings

Steen Rasmussen: I was looking so much forward to participate in this debate. I don't remember when I have been in a forum where somebody was saying, I mean, was talking about God in this way, this is wonderful. And I would like to ask you what God is, because, as a scientist people have sometimes asked me what I think God is, or whether I believe in God but I am interested in your perspective because it made a lot of sense, all the things you have said, it made sense and we can discuss about whether we have monism or dualism and whatnot, but what is God? Is that the ultimate cause of everything or is God something that is more than the ultimate cause of everything, is God intervening in some ways, in what is happening? I would like to know, when you say, for you what is God?

Lluis Oviedo: I have rather a minimalistic approach in this kind of conferences, not whey I am preaching in the church as a Catholic priest. But God, for me, is what allows to communicate in the code of transcendence, so using the difference of the contrast between eminence and transcendence so I don't understand what you are saying. What God is is what is behind the possibility of communicating in a religious way. And what is… this is perhaps too pragmatic or too abstract, but it's useful, perhaps, for our conversation or our discussion between theologians and scientists. Because if we have not the reference to God, we cannot communicate in a religious way, so we cannot use the codes of communication, distinguishing between transcendence and eminence and so we are deprived of this perspective of an alternative way of life and so on. In other words the reality of God is what allows me, and many other people, to think that there is an alternative way of life, an alternative world, an alternative or better way to engage with our world and so on. It is to have the intuition of an alternative form of existence in this minimalist way.

Moderator: But I must ask here, are you sure that your colleagues who share this vision also have the same way of sharing it, have the same understanding of God?

Lluis Oviedo: This view is inspired clearly in Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems which is perhaps a good candidate to deal with this hard issue in this kind of setting. But, obviously, from our Catholic stand and theological point of view, God is much more than this. God is love, as the first epistle of John, God is the one who saves the humankind through the action of his son, Jesus Christ and so on. But for the needs of such a conference, or such a seminar, I think it is more useful to use a rather minimalist approach like this one.

Ignacio Silva: I want to ask a very basic question and I think it is fundamental because we are coming from all different perspectives. Where do you put the question of monism versus dualism? As you started the talk today it seemed that the solution should come from science and you said science. At least that was my understanding, I am sorry. And you said science, so far, has too many problems that have not been solved and therefore it's in this state of provision, state of affair, it is useful to take the dualist position. If I may bring back a historical case – Galileo and Belarmine – Belarmine told Galileo give me proof, a demonstration, that the earth is not in the centre of the universe and I will change my reading of the scripture. Are we putting ourselves in that kind of situation? Belarmine was certain that there was no possibility of such a demonstration, now we

know that he was wrong. In that case it was a scientific question whether the earth is in the centre or not. My question now is monism/dualism – is it a scientific question?

LLUIS OVIEDO: No!

IGNACIO SILVA: Is it a theological question and if it is so, we come into Professor Rasmussen's problems. Scientists might not need to say much about it if it is only theological. However if it's philosophical I find the grounds for dialogue. If it is only theological it remains within the Christian tradition – period.

STEEN RASMUSSEN: If I may say something. I am really, really curious about how, I mean, do we have a middle ground and what is it and how can we…

LLUIS OVIEDO: Interact.

STEEN RASMUSSEN: Yes, how can we interact in a meaningful way? Because I, as a kid. You know up north, the Scandinavian countries, they are not very religious, but I was exposed to the scriptures, we had to go through them in school and I had priests, some of them were nice people and not so smart, some of them were very smart. But at some point I couldn't make sense of the scriptures because they were maybe interpreted in too naive a way, as you are indicating. But it's clear, I mean I certainly feel, as a human being, that I am asking, what is the sense of this, that and the other and you lose loved ones and you try to make sense in it and we all have this urge to live in a better world and I guess we all, even if we are scientist, we are sort of spiritual in some ways and I would like to see how that relates to what your position is. And when I am thinking about life and if we, human beings, create the next crown jewels of the evolutionary path, what does that mean to your tradition? Is that bad or is that good? What does that mean? And I just feel, instinctively, it is clear that human beings are very special, we are unique in many ways, there is no discussion about it. But we are part of the world and if we could, somehow, I shouldn't say, but I could much better reconciliate a God that is somehow creating, that is the ultimate cause of everything. That is the reason why we are here and, so to say, defines the laws of nature.

LLUIS OVIEDO: Yes, the problem with this kind of definition is that it sounds rather Deistic. Deistic means this kind of rational approach by philosophers in the 17th and 18th century who stated that the idea of God as the origin and the keeping of the harmony, the order of the universe, but little more. And that it could be more minimalist than my view in which I state that this idea or this concept of this belief in God is useful for us in order to imagine alternative lives. But there are two questions more or less related. The one by Ignacio which is whether dualism or monism issues just are a theological worry and nobody else is caring too much about this. I am not sure. All the discussion on naturalism, which is a big discussion; I was last year reviewing four new books on the discussion on natural and the issue of reductionism which is closely related with naturalism is not being settled and is a discussion in which, clearly, scientists are involved in many cases because many of them think that their ambition is not just to describe better how the world is and works. But whether inside the framework and the mindset of scientific understanding we can solve everything and give an ultimate answer to anything – that is the ambition of naturalism.

And I think that perhaps one of the functions of theology and religion, in general, but theology in particular, is just to keep some kind of bond between science can do, what science cannot do, what can provide and what cannot provide. And this connects with Rasmussen's question of what theologians or religious people can think about this process of evolution, and proceed to new expressions of post human, as some said, expressions.

We are really scared – that is the reaction. And I don't think that we are the only people, you say that you too, many other people are scared about the possibility about post human way of life or dialogical expression. And we are scared because most of the game, the intellectual game, at least in Christian theology, deals with the possibility of keeping some limits, nobody could or should overcome and that one is one of these limits so that the human condition is relatively fixed and if it's changed it would change everything. As it would change if we realised that intelligent life forms besides our planet, not just elementary forms of life in Mars, but if there are intelligent forms, lines of expressions in other planets and we could keep in contact with them. It would be a big challenge for theology as well. And so we are scared as well.

But that is one of the reasons why theology is not just a solid discourse where nothing would happen, as Anthony Kenny once pretended, that could affect or change the theological mind. They could happen, things that would really affect theological mind, so we are falsifiable in Poparian terms as many other disciplines of this course.

STEEN RASMUSSEN: I'm sorry, but I think this is really wonderful. But if ET comes, or if we realise there is extraterrestrial intelligence, that would be a major thing to realise that intelligence could actually evolve at different places and it would take a little bit of our uniqueness away, but it wouldn't change my desires for a better life. My feeling of love, and when I'm scared and this consolidation of thinking that when I get through this then there will be better times. So I think that the fundamental parts of religion can survive that, as you said, once we realise that the earth is not at the centre of The Universe, guess what, you guys survived and you were still going strong. And I think that's where sometimes we have conflicts because we take things too literally.

LLUIS OVIEDO: But I am scared about the perspective of meeting these extraterrestrial people in the third level or so, and that they told me, oh, you are religious, oh, we were religious thousands of years ago, but we realised that after many generations, after the advance of science and so on, that all this was a dream and we just left it. We will teach you how to survive in a very good way without this superstitions and these forced beliefs and so on. I am scared about this.

STEEN RASMUSSEN: But it could also be the opposite way that they delight them.

LLUIS OVIEDO: I know, but then all these spiritual ways, you can transcend the materials and what you guys, the spiritual leaders have said for eons is possible.

STEEN RASMUSSEN: These are things, these powers have been developed, so I think this is your chance.

LLUIS OVIEDO: And if there are some kinds of transcendants or spiritualities which resort to beliefs on extraterrestrial intelligent life and so on.

ROLAND CAZALIS: A question to Lluis. From a minimalist point of view, is there a real difference between the soul and consciousness, or what I mean by consciousness is what makes being like a human from this point of view. You can speak of uniqueness of a human being but I think every species is unique.

LLUIS OVIEDO: I think that consciousness is what is closer to the concept of soul, but obviously it is not the same, so as Damasio reminds us already in the introduction of his book, we are sometimes conscious and sometimes we are unconscious. When we are in deep sleep and this face of sleep we are out with our dreams and so on, I don't remember its name, we are perfectly unconscious, and despite this we think that we keep our soul.

But what would be soul detached from consciousness, I have no idea, no grasp. And then it would create some complications to traditional catholic ethics, for example when we pretend that embryos have some form of potential soul or inferior soul; they are very far away from being conscious. And what about some ways of human life which are deteriorating progressively like Alzheimer people. I was emotionally touched reading some weeks ago in Time magazine when I saw, that what some person who was involved in caring for a relative affected by Alzheimer, what was of big value for this lady was the conviction, that the idea behind the skin of this person who apparently was having no human behaviour of human mind was still a soul present. So in this case the soul is not just consciousness is what we could say the last expression of a human being, or the last harbour of humanity. But it is difficult, it's difficult, yes.

Chris Wiltsher: I want to point out that our discussion so far has been conducted entirely in terms of Christian theology. There are plenty of other religions which don't have concepts like the soul and we have to take account of how they understand the world, because they are as much part of our discussion as Christian theology. And if we can tie these two presentations together, a suggestion, think of a parallel… you spoke this morning of containers, of how you are creating things with a container and cells developing within a container, is the parallel God, that is that God is the container, and then if you begin to ask questions about cause and interactions and so on you may get some interesting answers.

José María Gómez: My question is, in science there are many entities that we don't know, that's energy, information, transformation from information to energy recently has been published in Nature and paper which describes how the information is transformed in energy. But in this case to monoist/dualist, there are many, years ago – Rubin Sheldrake published a controversial book, the New Biology, where there is an approach dualist. There is a morphogenetics control of the activity of the gene, a morphogenetics field. Transcendentally too there is a matter field, an energy field etc. Today the dualists in biology is that. The mopho-biologist are monoist. Their life is a physiochemical process implemented with processing information but there are not transcending entities that control this process.

Lluis Oviedo: Obviously I know the work of Sheldrake but it was 15 years ago, so that I was acquainted with this theories. even for me and my sensitivity appeared a little bit esoteric even if sometimes I got some intuitions of how animals which learn some process through some kind of how is said in quantum physics, this process which happens at the same time?

Lluis Oviedo: Entanglement, through some kind of entanglement are learned simultaneously by other animals which were not related and so on. But I am not sure that this is a good approach to rescue some appearance of dualist into biology. And my approach is that in biological or neurological terms it's okay that we are monists. The rules of the game there but the only thing is whether this is the only game in town. Whether there are other games to be played and whether we can nevertheless interact and this was the question of Rasmus as well, between different games being played, but in the same town which is the planet Earth and so on. And I am convinced that yes, that the ideal thing is that we can exchange, collaborate, interact in order to learn, but my hope is that despite the neuro-scientific and biological advances we are not damned to reductionist positions. But even after being very aware of neuro-scientific positions we can keep, nevertheless, free will and romantic love and aesthetic feelings and even spirituality. That is my expectation.