Respondent’s Remarks on Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo’s Keynote Address at The Rightful Place of Science? Conference

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Carl Mitcham was one of two respondents who spoke after Mons. Sorondo’s talk at the conference “The Rightful Place of Science?” presented by the Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes at Arizona State University, May 16-19, 2010, in Tempe, Arizona. Here is the text of his remarks:

Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo has offered a deft presentation of the Thomist approach to understanding the rightful place of science. This is an approach that is seldom if ever part of contemporary conversations about science, technology, and society. But it is a welcome intervention in what are otherwise sometimes stale disputes about social constructionism or networks of actors. His presentation also inserts into our discussion, although somewhat obliquely, the question of religion. In an effort to help us appreciate both points, I venture two brief interpretative comments.

The first comment concerns Thomism itself. The Thomist approach derives, of course, from the thought of Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1274, probably before the age of 50. Yet during more than three decades of intense study and teaching as a Dominican friar, and the production of a remarkable body of reflective scholasticism, he created what has been described as a distinctly Christian synthesis of Platonism and Aristotelianism, which are commonly considered the two basic schools of classical European philosophy. Wide appreciation of the radicalness of Thomas’ thought has not always been well served by his reputation as a follower of Aristotle — who was reviled by founders of modern natural science as diverse as Copernicus, Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes — or by his canonization as the official philosopher of the Catholic Church. For philosophy, institutional recognition can be the kiss of irrelevance if not of death.

The 20th century, however, witnessed a creative resurrection of Thomism. One can identify at least three major strands in this rediscovery. First, was the neo-Thomism of such French and German scholars as Etienne Gilson (with its historical orientation), Jacques Maritain (with an epistemological orientation), and Karl Rahner (influenced by Kant and Heidegger). Second, was the analytic Thomism of such British philosophers as Elizabeth Anscombe. Third, has been the radical orthodoxy Thomism of Catherine Pickstock and others. Indeed, in the United States, Alasdair MacIntyre, in the course of criticizing the approaches to moral theory typical of the scientific Enlightenment and Nietzschean genealogy — while developing his own Thomist defense of tradition — has actually suggested there are “too many Thomisms.”

I mention all these debates and names to give some hint of the rich and varied context from within which Monsignor Sánchez speaks. Our contemporary discourse on the rightful place of science is all too often more narrow than we appreciate. The truth is that in all these Thomist communities of discourse there has been — sometimes more and sometimes less explicitly — a consistent engagement with the nature and meaning of modern natural science that has been largely ignored, not only by STS studies but also by the more standard histories and philosophies of science. CSPO is to be commended for its remarkably pluralist efforts to engage a diversity of perspectives.

The most basic aspect of Thomist thought that is relevant to any reflection on the proper place of science may be crudely summarized as follows: According to Thomas and the tradition he represents, philosophy begins not in critical doubt — as it does in modernity and in science — but in an opening to and reception of what is, that is, of being. The human mind is at its most fundamental level perfected or realized by openness to and transformation by reality — rather than the tool-using transformation of reality. As an existent itself, the human being participates in being in a special way, such that its own existence becomes actualized to the highest degree by cognition of reality. Reality in turn manifests itself to humans in convertible forms as the true (being as manifested to the intellect), the good (being as manifested to the appetite), and the beautiful (being as manifested to the senses). Truth, goodness, and beauty are simply three distinctive ways that one reality manifests itself to the mind. However, because most human beings are oriented more toward the appetitive than the intellectual or the sensitive life, there is some sense in which the good provides a privileged access to that which is, so that the appearance of the good rightly trumps the appearance of the true and the beautiful. It is this dynamic that I take Monsignor Sánchez to have referenced — and which, in a society highly influenced by science and technology deserves special analysis.

The Thomist analysis further refuses to accept science in terms of its own self-presentation. This is a dimension of Thomism that might well have been more strongly emphasized. That is, although modern science famously presents itself in realist terms as the most reliable form of knowledge of what is, given its initiating critical stance, science

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exhibits a creative dimension that Thomist criticism can challenge. In modern science the mind is creator more than creature. In Thomism, all creativity is subordinate to receptivity, not the other way around. This gives Thomism a non-skeptical basis for criticizing science and placing scientific truth at the service of the good in a more general manner than any empiricism or pragmatism.

Let me make this point more forcefully as follows: The most common way to criticize science is in terms of its outcomes. Outcomes criticism in turn can focus either on a failure of science to produce a promised product (the hype problem) or a failure to meet a social need or desire (the social value problem). The social value problem can be further elaborated in terms of returns on investment, trade offs, and benefit-risks. But it is more difficult to criticize science when an outcome is achieved as promised and appears to meet a human need or desire. Thomism, however, claims to be able to subject human needs and desires to critical assessment in terms of virtue. Some needs or desires are better than others in that they are more receptive to and honoring of that which is — and therefore more hospitable to human perfection or flourishing.

There are, of course, many difficulties with this argument. Nevertheless, in discourse concerning science-society relationships and the proper place of science — the proper place of science not simply in society but in a spectrum or plethora of human activities — the Thomist perspective should not be rejected outright without an effort to consider its potential for political and policy enlightenment. When Monsignor Sánchez invokes the Christian virtue theory of Bernard of Clairvaux, who subjected knowledge production to spiritual discernment, he invites us to revisit a tension between what the great monastic historian Jean Leclercq identified as that between the love of learning and the desire for God. This is a tension which, in non-theistic terms, can also be found in Buddhism and in many other religious traditions. The Dali Lama, despite his openness to some forms of science, has also been quite firm about criticizing others, without limiting himself to issues of birth control and evolution.

That was my first and longest comment: a provisional apology for and invitation to consider Thomist philosophy as an approach to discovering the rightful place of science. A second comment concerns the related issue of religion. Insofar as Thomism rightly asks us to qualify the scientific pursuit of truth in multiple ways, including the placing of the scientific enterprise in the broader context of questions about goodness and justice, it also points toward the often unexamined role of religion in helping to adjudicate the rightful place of science. Religion is an often marginalized dimension of science-society relationships — marginalized, that is, except by such scholars as Jameson Wetmore.

Religious thought and practice, especially the religious thought and practice of Judaism and Christianity, have historically exercised a major influence on the course of scientific development in the European tradition. Sometimes, I fear, representatives of Christianity are only too anxious to affirm the Christian origins of science and compatibilities between the two. I think here particularly of many of the winners of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. But religious experience and practice also offers a major and often under appreciated perspective for the assessment of modern science. What Gina Kolata presented as a special evidence-based way of being in the world comparable in significance and influence to that of art — even though she unfortunately debased her own approach to that presentation as one of entertainment rather than edification — can in truth conflict with other ways of being in the world. Not all evidence is equally evidential.

Finally, moreover, the structural differentiation of culture that has given us the autonomies of various realms of human experience — from science and religion to politics, economics, and art — at some point and at some level (personally or culturally) call for reintegration. It is this reintegration that is the ultimate challenge posed by the question of the rightful place of science. It is also a challenge to which religious thought and institutions make a legitimate contribution. The only criticism of Thomism that I would offer in this regard, is that it has too often pulled its punches. But the presentation by Monsignor Sánchez this morning points in another direction, one that eschews cultural accommodation and entertainment in favor of investigation and edification.