

'The Soul' Conference

St Anne's College, University of Oxford – 28 June - 1 July 2013

The Centre for Philosophy and Theology in cooperation with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham hosted its fourth bi-annual conference this summer at St. Anne's College, Oxford. In only eight years their conferences have become nothing short of an international event, drawing numerous preeminent scholars and burgeoning young thinkers from around the world to address pressing contemporary debates by reflecting on topics of historical longstanding like metaphysics, reason, and life. Consistent with this approach, 'The Soul' Conference encouraged participants to respond to the naturalistic reductionism of the New Atheists and their ilk by exploring either the mind's irreducible yet intimate union with the body or how its irreducibility occasions or, more strongly, necessitates an account "from above". In explicating one or both of these trajectories participants sought to answer the question posed to them: If mind and soul are not readily derivable from below, must they not rather be derivable from above? With over one hundred and thirty papers presented in forty-seven different panel sessions, responses to this question varied greatly both in terms of disciplinary approaches applied and primary interlocutors expositied. Representatives from the fields of psychology, sociology, political philosophy, literature, philosophy, and theology enlisted a diverse spectrum of thinkers including – to name but a few – Ireneaus, Augustine, Aquinas, Cusanus, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Jonas, Anscombe, Merleau-Ponty, Marion, and Henry. It would be impossible to do justice here to such a rich, vast array of presentations, but a brief summary of several plenary papers will hopefully intimate some general trends and highlight several recurring themes.

In the first plenary session, Iain McGilchrist opened the conference by presenting the main argument of his most recent book, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale, 2009)¹ in which he contends that patterns associated with each hemisphere of the brain along with their unified though competitive collaboration can explain human experience; indeed, nothing short of the history of the evolution of Western culture including predominant constructs of meaning like philosophy and the arts. What seems

1 See http://www.ted.com/talks/iain_mcgilchrist_the_divided_brain.html (accessed 20 October 2013) for a cleverly condensed presentation of the book's argument.

particularly intriguing about McGilchrist's approach is that his account of the irreducibility of spiritual experience (i.e. there is not likely to be a single "God-spot" in the brain) must be reconciled with methodological reductionism requisite for his field of psychiatry. One unstated consequence of this is that philosophical arguments for irreducibility are themselves identified with brain function or, more specifically, those patterns characteristic of the right hemisphere provided one understands irreducibility to be concerned with the mind or soul taken as a whole.

A philosophical conception of the mind's irreducibility was presented by David Bentley Hart, who offered a foretaste of his recently released *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale, 2013). Hart argued that there is an "absolute qualitative abyss" between objective neurophysiological facts about the brain and the subjective experience of self-consciousness. He supports this assertion by appealing to the qualitative dimension of experience, the acquisition of knowledge by abstract concepts, the logical structure of reasoning, intentionality, and the unity of consciousness. And yet arguing for the irreducibility of the mind is not the same as arguing for a ghost-like thing occupying and somehow operating the body as Cartesian dualism would have it, but rather it is to argue quite the opposite; that is to say, the mind cannot be treated like a 'thing' or 'object' at all because it escapes those categorizations altogether as the immediate unified a priori the precedes every act of judgment and initiates every quest for truth. Elaborating on this last point, Hart draws upon an argument by Lonergan (and one might add, J. Maréchal before him) to explain how the mind's irreducibility consists of a primordial openness toward an infinite, ultimate intelligibility that alone can satisfy the finite mind.

Others at the conference highlighted the irreplaceable significance of the soul by contrasting it with "soul-less" alternatives. In a slightly revised version of an earlier paper, "Politics of the Soul"², John Milbank claimed that failure to base the social and political orders on the soul leads to the denigration of these orders and, correspondingly, the undoing of humanity itself. In both its Hobbesian foundations and postmodern revisions, liberalism proffers a reduced and pessimistic conception of the human person according to its basest aspects like natural necessity or individual will to power, thereby making the polis little more than a way to stay and steady these basest aspects. In contrast, Plato and Christian theology erect the polis on the psychology of the soul and in doing so orient both according to higher, transcendent values like justice, truth, and goodness.

In his presentation, "Soul Music and Soul-less Selving", William Desmond demarcates between the soul and the self by observing that the colloquial description of music as "soul-ful" indicates existentially an excessive, limitless, and mysterious (i.e. equivocal) aspect of the human condition largely absent in modern quests for the self. Modernity's penchant for certain, mathematical-like knowledge through scientific investigation objectifies nature and the self, rendering both soul-

² See <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/11/07/3628142.htm> (accessed 20 October 2013).

less by eliminating immeasurable and over-determinate variables as being outside its purview, beyond nature and beyond the body. The modern reification of the self begins with Descartes' designation of the *cogito* as a *res*, a fixed and determinate thinking thing becomes a substitute for the less tangible reality of the soul. Though the soul is not a thing, it need not be as alien and unknowable as it seems. Music knows it; life knows it; the animate body knows it, and our language reflects it. In a conference advocating for the continued relevance of the soul there could not have been a more fitting end, and perhaps more persuasive argument, than the conclusion of Desmond's closing plenary session, which ended with his singing of several stanzas of soul music – a kind of ode to the persistent presence of the soul no matter how long-forgotten.

These four plenary session presentations were but a small fraction of what was covered. Many of the panel presentations matched in quality and offered occasions for stimulating conversation especially when panelists differed among themselves. To give but one instance among so many, Agata Bielik-Robson emphasized a Judaic immanentist, messianic interpretation of Hans Jonas à la Derrida while Brian Robinette pursued a teleological interpretation of Jonas largely consistent with transcendent emphases in incarnational Christian theology. There are many other paper presentations that deserve mention including those by Stratford Caldecott, Mary Gerardi Taylor, Simon Oliver, Mary Midgley, Graham Ward, Elisa Grimi, Jeffrey Hanson, Nigel Zimmerman, James Mensch, Robert Milner, Mark Thomas, and Johannes Hoff, who presented his forthcoming *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Eerdmans, 2013). Add to these a host of other outstanding presentations, the launching of John de Gruchy's *Led Into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (SCM, 2013), and a reading by the Pulitzer Prize winning-novelist Marilynne Robinson, and it would be challenging to find a conference as robust and diverse.

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