theory of knowledge and its understanding of *phronêsis*, especially as they are expounded by St Thomas, would have provided him with a welcome rallying point for the various and enormously rich historical themes that absorb his attention, thus helping to highlight the deeply interrelated significance of a hugely varied array of intellectual preoccupations that often seem too disparate and disconnected in *A Secular Age*. Just as anamorphosis in art, *decorum* in history, and the conjunction of verisimilitude and wonder in literature all point to the deep human longing for transcendence within contingency, so a re-evaluation of the role of the Aristotelian-Thomist notion of *phronêsis* in human action might have given Taylor's prodigious range of interests a clearer rallying point.

Fernando Cervantes
Department of History
University of Bristol
11, Woodland Road
Bristol BS8 1TB
Email: f.cervantes@bristol.ac.uk

Charles Taylor replies:

I am grateful to Fernando Cervantes for exploring some facets of the emergence of modern Western epistemology which are essential to the story I would like to tell, but absent, or at least very undeveloped in my book.

I too have been very puzzled by the rise of a representationalist epistemology in the early modern period, one that is summed up for me in the phrase of Descartes in a letter to Gibieuf: Descartes declares himself 'assuré que je ne puis avoir aucune connaissance de ce qui est hors de moi, que par l'entremise des idées que j'ai eu en moi'.[38] This sentence makes sense against a certain topology of mind and world. The reality I want to know is outside; the mind, my knowledge of it is within. This knowledge consists in states of mind which purport to represent accurately what is out there. When they do correctly and reliably represent this reality, then there is knowledge. I have knowledge of things only through (par l'entremise de) these inner states, which we can call 'ideas'.

I want to call this picture 'mediational', because of the force of the claim which emerges in the crucial phrase 'only through'. In

London: Yale University Press, 1973); and John Milbank *Theology and Social Theory* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

[38] Letter to Gibieuf of 19 January 1642; English in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans Anthony Kenny, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970), p. 123.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01387_2.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

knowledge I have a kind of contact with outer reality, but I get this only through some inner states. One crucial aspect of the picture which is being taken as given here, and is thus on the road to being hardened into an unchallengeable context, is the inner/outer structure. The reality we seek to grasp is outside; the states whereby we seek to grasp it are inside. The mediating elements here are 'ideas', inner representations; and so the picture in this variant could be called 'representational'. But this, as we shall see, is not the only variant. This particular version has been challenged, but what has often escaped attention is the deeper topology which gives the unnoticed context for both the original version and the challenges.

This last point is the hardest one to make convincing. In all sorts of ways, Descartes passes in contemporary philosophy for a much-refuted thinker. His way of making the inner-outer distinction was via a radical differentiation between physical and mental substances, and this dualism has very few defenders today. Moreover, the mediating element, the idea, this particulate content of the mind, available to introspection, seems dubious, and worse, irrelevant to most contemporary accounts of knowledge. And one could go on in the litany of rejections.

And yet . . . , something essential remains. Take the 'linguistic turn'. For many philosophers today, if we wanted to give the contents of the mind, we should have recourse not to little images in the mind, but rather to something like sentences held true by an agent, or more colloquially the person's beliefs. This shift is important, but it keeps the mediational structure intact. The mediating element is no longer something psychic, but rather 'linguistic'. This allows it in a way to be 'outside', in the sense of the Cartesian distinction, because sentences circulate in public space, between speakers. But in another way, in that the sentence's being held true is a fact about individual speakers, and their (often unvoiced) thoughts, we recreate the same basic pattern: the reality is out there, the holdings true are in minds; we have knowledge when these beliefs (sentences held true) reliably correspond to the reality; we have knowledge through the beliefs. (Knowledge is 'justified, true belief'.)

Then take the materialist turn. We deny Cartesian dualism by denying one of its terms. There is no 'mental substance', everything is matter, and thinking itself arises out of matter. This is the kind of position which Quine espoused, for instance. And yet Quine recreated a similar structure in the new metaphysical context. Our knowledge comes to us through 'surface irritations', the points in our receptors where the various stimuli from the environment impinge. It is these which are the basis of our knowledge. Alternatively, he sometimes takes the immediate description of what is impinging, observation sentences, as basic, and he sees the edifice of science as built under the requirement that shows how (most of) these hold. In either

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01387_2.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

variant, there is a mediational, or 'only through' structure here. The proof of the indeterminacy of translation, of the uncertainty of reference, of the plurality of scientific accounts, comes from considerations that the choice between different ontological or scientific postulates will always remain not fully determined by these basic starting points.

'Inner' is being given a materialist sense here, in this 'naturalised epistemology'. Our knowledge of the external world comes in 'through' the receptors, and so they define the boundary, only in a 'scientific', and not a 'metaphysical' way. Similarly, we see the Cartesian structure repeated in various conjectures about a brain in a vat, which might be fooled into thinking that it was really in an embodied agent in a world, as long as a fiendish scientist was giving it the right input. Just as the old epistemology worried that as long as the contents of our minds remain the same, some evil demon might be controlling the input so that the world could change without our being any the wiser, so contemporaries re-edit a structurally similar nightmare around the brain. This has become the material replacement of the mind, supposedly because it is what causally underlies thinking. The mediational structure, and the mediating interface of inputs (now controlled by the fiendish scientist), and hence a parallel 'only through' claim, all survive the 'materialist' transposition.

If one asks the proponent of the brain-in-the-vat hypothesis why he focusses on the brain, he will reply something to the effect that thinking 'supervenes on' the brain. But how does he know this? How do we know that you don't need more than the brain, maybe the brain and nervous system, or maybe even the whole organism, or (more likely) the whole organism in its environment, in order to get what we understand as perception and thinking? The answer is, that no-one knows. The brain-in-the-vat only looks plausible because of the force of the mediational structure, our captivity in the picture implicit in modern epistemology, which requires something to play the role of 'inside'.

Let's take another transposition, the critical turn. I mean the shift inaugurated by Kant. Here the basic relation is no longer the picture-like internal representation and outer reality. Rather what Kant calls 'representation' (Vorstellung) often seems to be the same as outer (empirical) reality. But this can only be for us where the stuff of intuition, which comes in another sense from 'outside', in that it is something we receive, as we are 'affected' (affiziert) by things, is shaped by the categories which are the products of our minds. The 'only through' claim here takes a rather different form. It is only through the shaping of the categories that our intuitions furnish objects for us, that there is experience and knowledge. Without the concepts which we provide, intuition would be 'blind'. 'Inner', 'outer' and 'only through' all take on new meanings (indeed, in the

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01387_2.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

case of the first two, more than one meaning) in Kant's work. But the basic structure survives.

This extraordinary continuity in modern thought reflects a very deep taken for granted topology of mind-in-world, which in fact entraps even many of those who claim to have escaped it. As Cervantes points out, philosophers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have really shown a way beyond this, but whole rafts of supposedly anti-Cartesian materialists have not. As Wittgenstein put it, 'Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen' ('A picture held us captive'; see para 115 of the *Philosophical Investigations*).[39]

The strength of this picture consists in the fact that it seems obvious that no alternative seems to make sense. But in fact, we find alternatives in ancient philosophy. For instance, Plato's account of real knowledge, as against shadowy and evanescent opinion, in the *Republic*, turns on what reality one is in contact with, the really real and unchanging, or the ever-changing flux. He invokes the image of the eye of the soul, which is either turned towards the dark side of the universe, focussed only on the ever-moving and temporary copies, or swivels around to the side where light illuminates the eternal Ideas.[40] Here there is no hint of a mediating element, nothing separates us from reality. Real knowledge is a kind of unmediated contact.

Of course, we might protest that all this is metaphor, not real 'theory'. But then we might look at Aristotle, and the view of knowledge he presents in the *de Anima*. Here he says that actualized knowledge (*epistemê*), is one with the object.[41] The idea seems to be that just as the real object is what it is because it is shaped by the Form (*eidos*) appropriate to its kind, so the intellect (*nous*) in its own very different way can come to be shaped by different *eidê*. In correct knowledge of an object, the *nous* comes to be shaped by the same *eidos* as forms the object. There is no question here of a copy or a depiction; there is one and only one *eidos* of any kind. When I see this animal and know it as a sheep, mind and object are one because they come together in being formed by the same *eidos*.[42] That is why it is *actualized* knowledge which forms one with its object. If I

[39] The actual text of para 115 reads: Ein *Bild* hielt uns gefangen. Und heraus konnten wir nicht, denn es lag in unsrer Sprache, und sie schien es uns unerbittlich zu wiederholen. In my discussion, I argue more that the picture in anchored in our whole way of thinking, our way of objectifying the world, and thus our way of life, and therefore also in our language.

[40] Plato, *The Republic*, 518C-D; Plato speaks here of a 'conversion', a 'turning around' (*periagôgê*).

[41] 'to d' auto estin hê kat' energeian epistêmê tôi pragmati', *de Anima*, Book III, 430a20; and again at 431a1.

[42] Later Aristotle says that 'knowledge is the knowable and sensation is the sensible'. This doesn't mean that the sensible and cognitive faculties are identical with the object as a material entity; 'for the stone doesn't exist in the soul, but only the form of a stone'(431b22, 432a1). It is in the *eidos* that the mind and object come together.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01387_2.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

can introduce an image here to make the underlying idea intuitively stronger, we can think of the Form as a kind of rhythm giving shape to both objects and intellects. Where there is knowledge, the self-same rhythm joins both mind and thing. They become one in this single movement. There is unmediated contact.

As we slowly climb out from the deep hole that Descartes and others dug for us, we can come to see that there are alternatives to the mediational view, and the question becomes pressing to what extent we can or even must make use of the resources of ancient philosophy, and particularly of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. Cervantes' invocation of *phronêsis* is an important case in point. It has provided an entry point for a critique at one and the same time of modern epistemology and ethics. This whole area demands further exploration, and Cervantes' paper offers some very interesting starting points, for which we are all in his debt.

Charles Taylor
Department of Philosophy
McGill University
Leacock Building
855 Sherbrooke St.W.
Montreal
Quebec
H3A 2TZ Canada

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01387_2.x Published online by Cambridge University Press