

## Reply to Sho Yamaguchi

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I know exactly what Sho Yamaguchi means about certain debates in philosophy, where the lines of opposition are so trenchantly drawn, and the incredulity each side shows to the other is so intense and completely intransigent, that the spectacle of it seems, frankly, bizarre. Something, common sense dictates, must surely be wrong. One such exchange, which struck me hard when I was a student, took place between Daniel Dennett and John Searle (printed in Searle 1997, thereby allowing Searle to have the last word ... or was it rather Dennett, by not considering the correspondence worthy of appearing in a publication under his name?) Dennett and Searle are probably the two most eminent philosophers of mind in the world today. But on the face of it – in the sense, that is, of what we would naturally conclude from equivalent evidence within any other area of life – each thinks the other a fool. In this exchange, Searle basically says that denying the existence of conscious experiences, such as pains, is the most stupid thing any philosopher could ever say; and that Dennett says it. While Dennett basically says that relying on outdated intuitions, while ignoring all the scientific evidence which shows that these intuitions are mistaken is ... the most stupid thing any philosopher could ever do; and that Searle does it. What is a student, who finds the views of both philosophers interesting, supposed to make of such a spectacle?

Imagine taking your car to a garage, where one mechanic informs you that the problem is obviously with the gearbox; no question about it. Then another mechanic strides up, with a look of disbelief on his face, and tells you that it is obviously nothing to do with the gearbox: the problem is with the carburettor. They then both proceed to go at each other's throats. And just to add to the absurdity, suppose you later discover that these are the two most eminent car mechanics in the world! Surely one of them must simply be wrong. That was my immediate reaction when I encountered the Dennett / Searle exchange, and realised that its contours were to be found across philosophy's debates; albeit rarely so sharply defined. I remember telling my supervisor that I thought the

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problem was time and patience: they were giving up too easily. It seemed to me that whenever philosophical debates reached a crux of apparent irreconcilability, the participants became frustrated and quit, thereby leaving us onlookers none the wiser. So just lock Dennett and Searle in a room, I said, with lots of pieces of paper so they can map out their various steps, and refuse to let them out until they reach agreement; a psychologist could run tests to make sure they were not faking it. Then, assuming they deserve their reputations, we would have the answer. I gave up on this idea long ago. I think only one of them would ever leave the room (my guess: Searle). It was a naïve conception of philosophy; albeit one which remains popular among those who would formalise, and even computerise, all philosophical debates. *Something* must be wrong when these debacles occur, and not just *someone*.

Yamaguchi has an account of what is going wrong, and I find it highly gratifying that it takes inspiration from my book. The idea which captured his imagination is that of stepping back from the framework of daily life, in which our purposes are presupposed, to consider them in a broader perspective from which nihilism can come into view. Yamaguchi then connected this, quite rightly, with my concern throughout the book to reconnect the traditional problems of philosophy with matters of natural human interest. Philosophy has become insular in the shadow of scientific culture. Add to this the fact that its traditional problems have exceedingly long histories, and the result has been the isolation of philosophical problems from the natural human interest that sparked them off in the first place, leaving them of interest to professionals only. Too often, nobody much remembers why their topic was ever supposed to be interesting, and nobody much cares so long as writing about it allows them to publish. When philosophers address these issues in their ‘research papers’ – which is the misnomer scientific culture has landed our discipline with – I get the distinct impression that the question of why they are doing so is rarely at the forefront of their minds. They usually find the topic of personal interest, I think; although I have heard more than one successful philosopher tell me that they do not find their specialist topic interesting – it originally secured their professional niche, so they had to continue writing about it to maintain their reputation and publication output. Too often, the aim when writing a paper you intend to submit to a journal (and I have been there), is to prove you know what you are talking about, make a point that has not been made before – within the options provided by the recent literature – and thereby secure yourself a publication: in order to build your career as a philosopher.

Saying something that might be of interest to people generally, rather than simply to people who might cite your paper within their own paper, is too rarely on the agenda.

This blinkered approach works fine in many areas of life. I tend to prefer the work of artists who do not much care what the public wants to see or hear, but rather look to what their peers are doing, and try to come up with something as good or better. This produces good art, and the public tends to latch onto good art; and even if they do not, it does not devalue the artist's endeavour. But I do not think such an approach is conducive to good philosophy, even though it does regularly appear through the cracks; moreover the public will never latch onto it; and I think it does indeed tend to devalue the endeavour – since ways of philosophically understanding the world, rooted in the history of how humans have thought about these matters, and directed to our current concerns, are not thereby produced. What is produced is a myriad of different jigsaw pieces, most of which do not connect; some subsets of the pieces do, of course, but the task of putting them together has become peripheral to the main task of producing more and more pieces. All you need do is find flaws in recently produced pieces, and Hey Presto: you have produced a new piece. Piece-production has eclipsed puzzling within the closed doors of today's academy.

In light of this situation, combined with my concerns about the decline in the cultural status of philosophy – which scientistic culture is trying to capitalise upon with all its might – I advocated stepping back from the professional framework of 'what the players in the debate are saying at the moment,' to the much wider framework of life. I advocated thinking about why anyone ever cared about the topic in question, why anyone might still care about it, and why you, the philosopher, do. Yamaguchi says that, 'This ability to step back from a given framework Tartaglia calls "transcendence"' (pp. 288-9). Well, what I predominantly mean by 'transcendence' in *Meaningless* relates to my view that consciousness provides a context from within which we conceptualise the world, but that reality itself is 'transcendent', in the sense that its nature transcends such conceptualisations; except for the minimally contentful ones we use to metaphysically point to it. Nevertheless, I am all for creative readings of my work, and we certainly do 'transcend' frameworks in thought when we look to a wider framework from within which the goals that previously absorbed us to the exclusion of all else now take on a new significance. Metaphysics is the ultimate transcendence, in this sense. So Yamaguchi's terminology is fine by me.

Yamaguchi goes on – again in a manner I thoroughly approve of – to connect this view that philosophy needs to transcend its insular concerns to consider them within the sphere of a wider framework, with my distinction between ontology and enframement. Thus philosophy can benefit from framing its interest in ontological matters, such as the nature of consciousness or time, within a context which reveals the wider interest of the matter. As he puts it, ‘Answering the question of enframement of an ontological inquiry would justify the whole philosophical project at a deeper level’, and he memorably characterises this approach as ‘two-wheeled’ (p. 291).

He connects this ‘two-wheeled’ approach with discussions, in Chapters 3 and 8, where I say that the diversity of opinions to be found in philosophy only seems like a weakness if we make an inappropriate comparison to the kind of consensus that can be found in science or mathematics. For when we grasp what philosophy is really up to, we should not be expecting definitive, final answers. If everyone agreed with *The Book of Philosophical Answers*, there would no longer be any philosophy in the world, just a list of dead facts (or rather, a list of what these unrealistically unphilosophical people regarded as facts). Similarly, if all painters tried to mimic the style of Chagall as closely as possible, then the art of painting would be pretty much dead – completely dead if they simply reproduced his originals. And if everyone agreed about the causes of World War I, then that topic would no longer be a live one for historians. Connecting all these ideas up in his own original way, then, Yamaguchi reaches the view that by continually transcending philosophical debates – to frame them within a wider context determined by the concerns of the day which the philosopher finds his- or herself living among – philosophy becomes a never-ending practice. ‘Finding a definitive answer to a question would, therefore, not be any genuine part of our philosophical journey.’ (p. 293)

I have sympathy for this position, but I think it goes a little too far. All I would say, and did say in *Meaningless*, is that it seems exceptionally unlikely, in light of the history and nature of philosophy, that we will ever find definitive answers to the traditional problems of philosophy which everyone can agree on; after all, there is disagreement in philosophy even over matters such as the Law of Non-Contradiction. However I also do not think this is something to worry about. In philosophy, we cannot simply work within the confines of objective thought, which sets up strict criteria for accurate representation, since the status of the world objective thought describes is itself a paradigmatically philosophical issue.

The history of philosophy provides us with a variety of competing representational systems with which to attempt to describe reality in this wider context, via investigation of the various phenomena which resist incorporation into objective thought and thereby indicate the presence of a wider context. In such an endeavour, objective thought cannot settle matters on its own; even the physicalist who wants it to, will still have to portray the objective world as the final context, thereby stepping outside of objective thought and into philosophy. Moreover, given the variety of competing representational systems that have been developed – none of which are required by objective thought, otherwise the problems they seek to address would never have arisen – there are no universally accepted definitions from which a definitive answer might be derived *a priori*. As such, continuing disagreement is practically inevitable. But this is no bad thing, because it prevents objective thought from closing in on itself, and thereby keeps the world philosophical.

I would not say that a definitive answer would ‘not be any genuine part of our philosophical journey’, then, only that we should not see lack of consensus as a problem, but rather a facet of philosophy. We have to look for definitive answers, and I think it would be great if there could be consensus around an answer which affirmed, in some essential way, the transcendent nature of our reality. I would love for everyone to agree on that, primarily because the world would thereby become a more philosophical place again; intransigent oppositions would still proliferate, of course, but the prospect we currently face of objective thought closing in on itself would have become a distant memory – a laughable one, I should have thought, were everyone to come to agree on this, as a new kind of background common sense. If I find solutions I am happy with, then I do not see anything wrong with promoting them as the answers which should be accepted as definitive. Anything else would seem rather wishy-washy. For although I think philosophy has an affinity with art, in that it has developed a variety of schools of representation, and aesthetic and emotional effects belong within its remit, it must always be a representational ‘art’. The idea of a purely abstract philosophy makes no sense to me. If there is a transcendent context of meaning, then I am wrong about nihilism, and that is that; regardless of whether there is any way I could ever possibly know this. You might be wrong in philosophy – but you cannot really be wrong in art. You are extremely unlikely to be right if you think you are better than Picasso; but your paintings will not be wrong.

Yamaguchi’s position is rather stronger than mine, then, in that he thinks the

idea of a definitive answer is a mistake to be shunned; whereas I, mindful of the quotation from Kołakowski with which I opened Chapter 8 (PML, p. 169), think that such an answer has to be your aim when you enter into metaphysical inquiry. Yamaguchi has extended my views in his own direction, which is a good thing; it is what you should always try to do with philosophical ideas, if you can. This is not to deny, of course, that there remains a very close affinity. After all, even though I would be glad if some position on the transcendence of reality were to become definitive, I would still expect it to be continually ‘transcended’, in Yamaguchi’s sense, in the hands of each new creative philosopher. And I am always looking for opportunities to ‘transcend’ my own positions with new resonances. However, it is the extra strength of his position, according to which we should not even be seeking a definitive answer, and thereby should not be arguing that others have it wrong, which provides his solution to the puzzle of intransigence with which I opened this reply. I stand by my conviction that something must be wrong when philosophy can produce spectacular standoffs like the one between Searle and Dennett. So let us see how Yamaguchi’s solution fares in explaining what it is.

Yamaguchi illustrates his solution against the backdrop of the free will debate. I shall be rather cagey as regards the content of this debate, because in the sequel to *Meaningless* which I am currently working on, free will is one of the traditional topics I will address, along with personal identity and truth; just as in the original I addressed consciousness, time and universals. Since I have yet to get into the fine detail of my account of freedom, however, I want to avoid saying something I might later regret. So I shall leave free will as an example, and focus on the metaphilosophy.

He gets to the crux of the matter in the following passage:

if there were one fixed reality, independent of our objectification and conceptualization, then there would have to be one true answer to the question “Are we free or not?” Adequate observation of this reality would tell us the Truth of human freedom. Realism uncritically presupposed in the free-will debate thus entails the ‘harmful’ supposition that the free-will question has one determinate answer.

Why is this harmful, however? It is because, if it is assumed that there is this one Reality, then the difference between the core suggestions of libertarianism, compatibilism and free will skepticism would turn into an

opposition or conflict concerning who knows the Truth. What each participant in the debate aims at would be, in consequence, to show that only her or his view is true. She or he would therefore try to find faults in the other camp's position, but not to understand the good aspects of it. Thus, one speaks and the others just shake their heads in disbelief, .... (p. 296).

The solution, then, is to reject the assumption that there is one, fixed and determinate reality from which we are trying to discover the answer as to whether we are free or not. Reality is transcendent so will not yield such answers. Rather, we make philosophical progress through the deepening of understanding we achieve by looking for the truth in all the three main positions in the debate: compatibilism, libertarianism and free will scepticism. We look for the 'good aspects' of each, and thereby avoid the kind of standoff that arises when we assume that one must be wholly right and the other two wholly wrong. We transcend the terms of the debate, frame it within the context of our personal journey of philosophical discovery, and see what we can take from all sides.

I find this an appealing vision, and following it through would indeed seem to avoid any potential for unproductive impasses, of the kind which can place our discipline in a most unattractive light. However, once we get into the detail of what Yamaguchi thinks he can take from the various sides of the debate, doubts start forming in my mind. From the side that affirm freedom (the compatibilists and libertarians), Yamaguchi takes the following insight. Whenever we take a stance on the free will issue, he thinks, whether by looking at our actions as physical, causally determined events, and hence not as freely chosen and self-determined, or else when we look at our actions *as* actions, as we do within the framework of daily life, and hence as freely chosen actions originating in our decisions to work towards certain goals, then whichever way we decide to look at it, we are *deciding, choosing, acting*. 'Selection is an action', as he puts it (p. 298). In my terms, we might say that philosophy, like any of our other activities, takes place in the framework, even though it sometimes requires us to disengage from the framework in thought.

The action of transcending our framework of actions in order to see them as causally determined movements partially undermines the free will sceptic's position, in Yamaguchi's view, thereby rendering it 'absurd' (p. 299). For then the sceptic is saying, as a freely-chosen action, meant to be interpreted as such (they want us to choose to embrace their position rather than any other) that the sound

passing the barrier of their teeth is just ‘mere noise’ (p. 300). They are asserting that they are not making an assertion. If we take them at their word, we have no position to respond to; but the very fact of taking them at their word gives us all the reason we need to reject their position.

However, this only partially undermines their view, for Yamaguchi also thinks there is a sound insight to be taken from free will scepticism. For we can indeed transcend our ordinary framework in which action and purpose is presupposed, in order to view ourselves from the wider perspective of the physical universe. As he puts it, ‘We can, in fact, step back from our own absolute perspective and relativize it through mediation with something beyond us (*e.g.*, God and natural law). We would, in this way, find that our behavior is just mere happening of which we have no ultimate control’ (p. 302). We thereby show recognition of our finitude by relativizing our lives within the framework, to something larger. So both the free will and anti-free will sides of the debate are onto something, and by recognising our ability to transcend our situation in thought, we can take the good aspects of both in order to weave them into our own personal philosophical journeys, without feeling the need to stand our ground on one side or the other. The transcending ability shows we are free; what we discover when we exercise it in a certain way shows that we are not.

I find this account original, well-motivated and interesting; but as I said before, I have my doubts. Firstly, it seems to me that Yamaguchi is siding with the compatibilist, although officially he is not supposed to be taking sides. For if, as he says, ‘human behavior is necessarily free at the ultimate level’ (p. 301), given our transcending ability and the fact that exercising it always places our utterances in the space of reason and action, and yet he does not seek to deny the legitimacy of conceiving these same utterances as simply physical movements, then it seems to me that the free will sceptic must simply be wrong to think that free will is an illusion. It appears illusionary when we take up a certain stance towards the world, but at the ‘ultimate level’, it is always there, being exercised in the background. So free will and determinism are compatible. Moreover, the third side of the debate, libertarianism, receives very little concession within Yamaguchi’s account. It is right about the reality of free will; but then so is compatibilism, which does not make the mistake of thinking free will is incompatible with determinism – a mistake which places libertarianism on the misguided track of trying to insert a special kind of agent causation into the physical world. So it seems to me that Yamaguchi is saying that compatibilism is right, but that nevertheless there is

something right about free will scepticism (which the compatibilist recognises) and something right about libertarianism (which the compatibilist also recognises). This is somewhat conciliatory; but then, compatibilism, by its very nature, is a conciliatory position. He will still be faced with free will sceptics saying, ‘no, there is no free will at all’, and libertarians saying, ‘no, our physical perspective on the universe does not reveal any truth to free will scepticism’.

And secondly, I have my doubts about the potency of Yamaguchi’s central argument against the free will sceptic, namely that our ability to transcend the framework and take up a purely physical perspective undermines their position. For they can simply say that Yamaguchi’s ‘mere noise’ is a causal determinant of yet more ‘mere noise’: one person emits sounds, these sounds are processed in the brain of another, causing them to respond with yet more sounds, bodily movements, etc. They can say that although we naturally interpret these sounds as intentional speech acts, that is not what they really are, and the interpretation we place on them is simply another part of the causal network. Hence there is only really sound and movement, and the act of transcending the framework in thought is yet more of the same. I am not saying I agree with this, but nevertheless I think this is what they would say; and nothing in Yamaguchi’s account undermines it.

I very much like the aim of Yamaguchi’s account, then, namely that of steering our discipline towards a more tolerant, self-reflective and productive future, and I think he is working along the right lines (naturally enough, perhaps). I am just not sure he is quite there yet; but I look forward to his future development of these ideas. So what do I myself think was going on in the clash of the titans between Searle and Dennett? Essentially, what I said in *Meaningless* about the general root of philosophical standoffs on the transcendence-denying side.

Both Searle and Dennett think that consciousness needs to be incorporated into the scientific world-view of objective thought, but they have different tactics for pursuing this doomed and damaging project. Searle thinks the scientific world-view must be expanded to include subjective properties, while Dennett thinks the scientific world-view requires us to reject subjective properties. Philosophy-scepticism is more deeply ingrained in Dennett, which is why he hates Searle’s philosophical intuitions so much, but both are motivated by science-worship; the only reason Searle is happy with his philosophical intuitions is that he thinks a metaphysic dictated by science can incorporate them by simply saying that brain states causes subjective properties. Searle is more realistic, because when philosophers like Dennett are not breathing down scientists’ necks, they are

perfectly happy to say which of the brain states they are investigating cause which states of consciousness; it is the natural thing to say when you are not doing philosophy. The philosophical pyrotechnics Dennett engages in so as to make consciousness disappear are hardly likely to be embraced outside of philosophy. And yet Dennett has a better grasp of the philosophical situation, because consciousness does indeed need to be exiled to the realms of pure illusion if the metaphysics of physicalism is true.

The reason they find it so hard to stomach each other's positions is that in their minds, the scientific respectability of philosophy is at stake. The only future for philosophy, they both think, is one in which it walks hand-in-hand with science. As leaders of their profession, this raises the stakes considerably. Searle thinks that Dennett's denial of something as blatantly obvious as conscious experience will lead his discipline into disrepute and ultimate ruin; science is currently finding out more than ever before about consciousness, and if philosophy is seen to be denying its existence, it will be ridiculed and isolated. Dennett, on the other hand, thinks that Searle is making claims without scientific evidence, and that philosophy only has a future if it learns to track scientific discoveries at every turn, never deviating too far from them; common sense and philosophical reasoning must no longer seek to supplement, and can certainly never be allowed to conflict with, the hard evidence of the sciences; otherwise, once more, the discipline will fall into disrepute. Both have closed their minds to the notion of transcendence, and hence an absolutely central component of the history of their discipline, from which its future will unfold. Eradicate scientism and reassert philosophy's own identity, and their worries disappear in a puff of smoke. Philosophy will never have a future hanging onto the coattails of science. When its conflicting voices try to help science out, the result is the opposite of that intended; if philosophers were not so keen to get involved, I expect there would be a lot less philosophy-scepticism in popular science books.

Without the influence of scientism, I think they could probably see some good in each other's positions. At the very least, such intemperate exchanges would be less likely, because much less would be at stake: within a self-confident discipline eager to assert its independence, all that would be at stake is how best to philosophically describe consciousness, and although they would still reject each other's starting points, they might still find some useful insights transpiring further down the line; Dennett's reflections on the inaccuracy of introspective judgements, for instance, or Searle's account of the intentional structure of mind.

I have no doubt that standoffs would still occur, but if each side made more effort to understand the reasoning behind the other's curious starting point, so that it came to seem a little less curious; and if they no longer saw the starting point as a reason not to look further down the line to find out whether it issues in something that could profitably be incorporated into their own understanding; then these standoffs might be a little more productive. This might sound rich coming from me, given the polemical character of the appendix to the introduction to *Meaningless*. But: I did make considerable effort to understand the starting point of the meaning *in* life debate; the direction it heads thereafter falls outside of my interests in that book; I am still learning; and philosophy is not where it needs to be yet.

Yamaguchi ends his paper with the criticism that, 'Tartaglia unnecessarily emphasizes the meaninglessness of our life to an excessive degree, because his discourse seems at least to me to imply that there is a deeper dimension of meaning of life than the ordinary, social one' (p. 303). Well, I would have needed a different title if I had not, and besides, I think nihilism is a very big deal: it provides a legitimate secular answer to an unjustifiably maligned philosophical question which has deep personal resonance for us all. His reasoning is that, 'there is a deeper dimension of meaning of life than the ordinary, social one,' and that this is provided by undertaking a philosophical journey, which might include 'Deepening our understanding of life's meaning' (p. 303). This just strikes me as social meaning; which is no bad thing. Social meaning makes life worth living, and if philosophy is your particular thing, it can provide plenty of the good kind. Writing this reply gave me a buzz, and I hope it will do something similar for Yamaguchi and others. I see no good reason to try to elevate our buzzes over those of others, and I see no plausible way of doing so either. If philosophy is good, then others will latch on; always have, always will.

## References

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