REPLY TO BO MOU

John R. Searle

This is a good opportunity for me to say how grateful I am personally, and how we all are, to Bo Mou for his terrific work in organizing this wonderful conference.

In his paper he raised so many questions that I will not be able to answer all of them, but let me approach at least several of them. I will begin by mentioning two possible areas of disagreement. First it seems to me that he sometimes talks as if “transcendental perspectivalism” would enable consciousness to rise above all perspectives and thus dispense with aspectual shape. I do not believe this is possible. By definition all intentionality, and indeed all representation, is always under an aspect, from a point of view. I wish to distinguish on the one hand between the claim that we should always be able to rise above our local cultural prejudices and points of view, and on the other hand the claim that we might have representations which had no point of view and no aspect under which the conditions of satisfaction are represented. I think the idea of rising above our local predilections is possible and indeed desirable. This conference is a good example of transcending local points of view. But I do not believe it is possible to have representations without aspectuality.

A second possible misunderstanding is where he suggests that there is a “tension” in my view about the relationships of science and philosophy. He says “Searle seems to take the scientific perspective as the superior one over other relevant perspectives”. But that is not my view. My view is that to solve a problem you need to use any resources that are available. Since the 17th century we have found certain problems solvable by a family of methods that we misleadingly call “science”. But many of the problems that worry us most, about truth and justice and the good life, for example, have not proved amenable to these methods. At the level at which I try to work I do not have any serious practical use for a sharp distinction between “science” and “philosophy”, though there are important historical, sociological, and even intellectual differences, as I try to explain in the article he cites.
I think the best way for me to proceed in the rest of this reply will be to try to state some of my views in a way that will relate them to his discussion.

First, conceptual relativism. I insist that the world divides up the way that we divide it. It does not come to us previously divided by conceptual categories. So for example, we think of this rostrum as one object and this table on which the rostrum sits as another object, but there is nothing to prevent us from having a conceptual structure that treats the bottom half of this rostrum and this portion of the table as a single object. We could give this object the name “klerg.” You might suppose there is a culture where klergs are very important—they can only be constructed by sacred virgins working underwater, and if you destroy a klerg you suffer the death penalty. That is not our culture, but it is easy to imagine a culture like that, and frankly, there are probably things in our culture that are just as silly as that. Anyway, that is a possible culture. The view that we can invent any concepts we like to describe the world, and thus divide up the world the way we want to divide it, is called conceptual relativism. Some philosophers suppose that the truth of conceptual relativism implies that there is no real world, that we are constantly inventing the real world. I want to say that this is a mistake: it is not the world which is changed from culture to culture, it is our way of describing the world which is changed, and that is because we can use different categories for describing the same reality. Thus in one culture there are klergs but in another culture there are no klergs. The point is this: once you invent categories like “tree” or “cow” or “ghost” then it is a matter of objective fact in the world whether or not there are trees or cows or ghosts. We invent the categories, but whether or not there are features of reality that correspond to the categories is up to the real world and not up to us. Now, there are some parts of the real world that we do invent, and those are the social and institutional features of the world such as money, property, government and marriage. But that is a separate question, distinct from the question about cultural relativism.

Just to summarize this point, and it is a crucial point, we can invent any categories we like, but whether or not there are objects that correspond to those categories is not up to us, it is up to how reality is, independently of us.

What about perspectivalism and aspectual shape? All intentionality has aspectual shape. That just means that all representation is under an aspect, and remember there is nothing necessarily phenomenological