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THE CONNECTION BETWEEN METAPHYSICS, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND LANGUAGE

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

In this article, the author sets forth the triad of metaphysics, epistemology, and language (MEL). Language is bound up with thought, and thought is bound up with being. After introducing the biblical roots of this triad and its relation to the Trinity, the author applies it to image-bearing creatures. He then examines a secular approach to this triad in the work of John R. Searle, critiquing it in light of basic Reformed theological assumptions. He then responds to Searle and ends by reaffirming the benefits of Kenneth L. Pike's language theory as applied to the intimate relationship among language, thought, and being.

Who and what are we? How and why do we know? And how and why do we communicate? Perhaps there are no more basic questions than these. They highlight, respectively, metaphysics, epistemology, and language. As with all questions posed to the Christian academic, these must have answers that are biblically derived and reflective of the Trinitarian God in whose image we are made.

In this article, I will sketch the groundwork for the relationship between metaphysics, epistemology, and language, which I have elsewhere referred to as the MEL triad.¹ After defining this triad in general, it is important to outline its biblical roots before applying it both to the Trinitarian God and to his creatures. Next I will briefly consider a few dangers of secular approaches to the MEL triad, in the work of contemporary philosopher John R. Searle. Then I will respond to Searle and end by suggesting how the language theory of Kenneth L. Pike is situated in relation to the MEL triad. I make this final point because I believe that the gravity of Pike's language theory is yet to be appreciated by Reformed theologians. Pike's language theory, after all, is not simply a revision of our approach to communication; it is a revision of our approach

Pierce Taylor Hibbs is Associate Director for Theological Curriculum and Instruction in the Theological English Department at Westminster Theological Seminary.

¹ See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "Imaging Communion: An Argument for God's Existence Based on Speech," *WTJ* 77 (2015): 35–51.

to all of human behavior, thought and action included.² At the same time, the MEL triad is a massive topic in and of itself, worthy of volumes, so we must acknowledge at the outset that we can only sketch the groundwork here.

I. *Defining the MEL Triad*

The MEL triad, in its most basic expression, simply means that language is bound up with thought (epistemology), and thought is bound up with being (metaphysics).³ In other words, language, epistemology, and metaphysics are intertwined and must be understood in conjunction with one another. We cannot understand who we are apart from what and how we think, nor can we understand what we think and who we are apart from language. Any discussion of language presupposes a certain epistemology and metaphysics.⁴ Let us draw this out in a bit more detail within a biblical worldview.

With regards to metaphysics, because we are made in the image of the triune God of Scripture, we are personal, relational beings, just as God is personal and relational in his triunity. As Poythress notes, “The New Testament indicates that the persons of the Trinity speak to one another and enjoy profound personal relations with one another.... Personal relationships exist not solely among human beings, but also in divine-human relationships, and even in divine-divine relationships.”⁵ As creatures bearing the image of the Trinity, we too are personal and relational. Gerald O’Collins reminds us that “authentic personhood does not spring out of one’s private experience but is given and received within relationships. To be a person is to be an interpersonal subject, sharing love and giving oneself in love.”⁶ Yet, the Creator-creature distinction remains at the forefront of this discussion. Human persons are separate subjects, each with a separate consciousness and will, whereas with the divine persons “one consciousness subsists in a threefold way and is shared by all three

² I will be considering human behavior an aspect of metaphysics, since behavior is inherently bound up with being. What we do is governed by who we are.

³ In addition to being influenced by Cornelius Van Til here, my initial thoughts on the MEL triad were influenced by John Frame’s triad of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 19, 63, 109. Also see his *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 704–5; and *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2015), 24–36.

⁴ It is critical that we not separate ontology from epistemology. Van Til noted that “God’s knowledge is what it is because his being is what it is” (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003], 26). See also Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 56–57; K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 41, 69n22.

⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 24.

⁶ Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist, 2014), 177.

persons, albeit by each of them distinctively.”⁷ The Creator-creature distinction, however, is not meant to erase mystery from personhood and all its attendant behaviors—especially language. We are not saying, in other words, that mystery exists for divine Persons but not for human persons. In fact, it is precisely because personhood is rooted in the Trinity that all of what we do, think, and say is, upon close examination, permeated with mystery.⁸ So, while it is critical to keep the Creator-creature distinction in focus, we must also understand that language will never be reductionistically explained via principles and theories within creation—not because language is too complex, but because it is rooted in an eternal being who is independent from creation and whom we cannot comprehensively understand.⁹ That needs to be taken into account when we

⁷ *Ibid.*, 178. Quite a ruckus has been raised by Van Til’s claim that the whole Godhead is one Person and that God is both a uni-conscious and tri-conscious being. The latter statement was introduced by Van Til when he discussed the Trinity in his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007). Lane Tipton’s article, in my opinion, has clearly revealed what Van Til’s (and perhaps Charles Hodge’s) primary concern was in using such allegedly heterodox language: a defense of God’s incomprehensibility. This was centered in the ancient teaching of perichoresis: the mutual interpenetration of the persons in the Godhead. “Hodge recognizes that the mysteries of God’s intratrinitarian existence infinitely transcend the limitations of human reason, particularly in light of the perichoretic relationships. Perichoresis in Hodge’s theology involves a description of God’s unity which moves beyond a mere unity of essence (i.e., toward a unified person) without compromising the tripersonality of the Godhead, and such a formulation accentuates God’s incomprehensibility” (Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *WTJ* 64 [2002]: 293). Tipton continues, “It seems clear from Van Til’s reflections that he does not intend to replace a traditional Trinitarian formula; instead he wants to supplement a potentially deficient expression of the orthodox formula.... The person/essence formulation is accurate and veridical so far as it goes. However, Van Til is convinced that such a formulation, if left as the sole statement of Trinitarian orthodoxy and articulated in a rationalistic manner which fails to take account of perichoresis, simply fails to explain adequately the complexity and richness of orthodox Trinitarian theology” (p. 295). See also Tipton, “The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004), 89–113.

For a survey of the church’s understanding of “Person” throughout the centuries, especially in light of contemporary Trinitarian theology, see Ángel Cordovilla Pérez, “The Trinitarian Concept of Person,” in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Giulio Maspero and Robert J. Woźniak (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 105–45. For a concise definition of “person,” see William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tripersonal God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 193.

⁸ Recall the striking statement of Van Til in his classroom several decades ago: “We certainly cannot penetrate intellectually the mystery of the Trinity, but neither can we penetrate anything else intellectually because all other things depend on the mystery of the Trinity, and therefore all other things have exactly as much mystery in them as does the Trinity” (Cornelius Van Til, “Christ and Human Thought: Modern Theology, Part 1” [lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA, n.d.]). See also Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 460; and Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “Where Person Meets Word, Part 1: Personalism in the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike,” *WTJ* 77 (2015): 357–59.

⁹ So, in a sense, yes, because it is too complex, and because, with Pike, it cannot be detached from other human behaviors. However, we can treat all of human behavior from the perspective of *creatures*. In fact, that is precisely what the biblical narrative demands that we do.

explore the structure and coherence of language. We are *creatures* handling a *Creator's* gift. All I aim to affirm in terms of metaphysics is that we are personal, relational, communicative, image-bearing beings who are bound in covenantal relationship with the triune God. That, in short, is *who* and *what* we are.

Our epistemology follows from our metaphysical identity. Creatures made in the image of the tripersonal God are made to think God's thoughts after him analogically, within a world that is exhaustively revelational of God himself.¹⁰ We do not think univocally (to the same extent and in the same manner as God) or equivocally (as if our thought were inherently unreliable and unstable). Rather, we might say that we think *revelationally*, that is, as creatures informed by God's revelation.¹¹ Here, once again, I mean only to affirm what the Reformed tradition has known as a revelational epistemology.¹²

Lastly, regarding language, we need to remember that it is fundamentally communal. Language is, as I have written elsewhere, *communion behavior*.¹³ It is the key that unlocks the doors of our minds so that we can relate to other beings.¹⁴ It is not, first and foremost, a tool for information transfer or a self-serving social faculty. It is a behavior that allows interaction and communion with other beings, which of course then leads to more specific uses such as the gathering of information and caring for one's physical and social needs. This behavior traces back to the Trinity, in a qualified sense, of course. The persons of the Godhead communicate with one another in unending reciprocity of love and glory.¹⁵ Their communication fosters perfect union among distinct

¹⁰ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 62, 67, 70–71, 183, 376; *Christian Apologetics*, 77; *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 31, 33, 42, 177–78, 185, 292, 363; *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 16, 17, 38, 47, 172, 278. See also paragraph 12 of John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/>; and Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 268.

¹¹ Oliphint reminds us of the centrality of our imaging behavior: "A person is, in the deepest sense of the word, an image, an *eikon*, made according to the 'pattern' of the Original, the triune God. This means that whatever we are, think, and do, we are, think, and do as image. We will never become, at any time and in any way, original" (Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 179).

¹² For a helpful introduction to what a revelational or biblical epistemology is, see G. K. Beale and W. Andrew Hoffercker, "Biblical Epistemology: Revelation," in *God, Man, and Knowledge*, vol. 1 of *Building a Christian World View*, ed. W. Andrew Hoffercker and Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986), 193–216.

¹³ Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language," *WTJ* 78 (2016): 299–322; and "Words for Communion," *Modern Reformation* 25, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 5–8. For a full discussion, see my recent book, *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

¹⁴ "The modern impersonalist worldview thinks of the human mind as a closed room. But when God created us, he intended our human minds to be open rooms in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell" (Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 134).

¹⁵ On "mutual glorification" of the persons in the Godhead, see Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 480–81; Francis Cheynell, *The Divine Triunity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (London, 1650), 62; Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henry De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1995), 542; and Dumitru Staniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*,

persons who share the same essence. We might say that, while our communication attempts to foster communion, Trinitarian communication simply *is* communion.

That, in short, is the MEL triad. Understanding and applying this triad requires that we keep in mind the Creator-creature distinction, as stated earlier. The triune God *is*, *thinks*, and *communicates* in a way that is qualitatively different from the being, thought, and language of humanity. And yet, this qualitative difference has built into it an analogical correspondence, made possible by the fact that this God chose to create us in his image. Before looking at an example of how this triad can be misunderstood in secular thought, we need to examine its biblical roots.

II. Biblical Roots of the MEL Triad

On every page of the Bible, there is some reference, direct or indirect, to who we are, how or what we should think, and how we communicate. In light of this, exploring the biblical roots of the MEL triad is an intimidating venture in its own right. Once again, we must limit ourselves and start by focusing on a particular text. One passage that brings together the entire triad quite clearly is 1 Cor 2:11–13. I have placed the Greek next to the English translation below to show how I see the MEL triad connected to the original language.¹⁶

<p>¹¹ τίς γάρ οἶδεν ἀνθρώπων τὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰ μὴ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ; οὕτως καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐδεὶς ἔγνωκεν εἰ μὴ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ.</p> <p>¹² ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα εἰδῶμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισθέντα ἡμῖν.</p> <p>¹³ ἃ καὶ λαλοῦμεν οὐκ ἐν διδακτοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις ἀλλ' ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες.</p>	<p>For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.</p>
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trans. Roland Clark (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), who writes that “the divine essence is only divine when hypostasized in three Persons, because these three have a value and a relationship between Them that deserves and is capable of absolute love” (p. 17). He later notes, “The highest form of love is revealed to us in the unending love between the one and only Father of a unique Son. Yet throughout eternity the love between the Father and the Son has also been directed toward a third Person who takes joy in the love that each has for the other” (p. 55).

¹⁶ All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Notice here the three elements of the triad: (1) a personal being (*ἀνθρώπων/θεός*); (2) knowledge or thought (*οἶδεν/τὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου/ἔγνωκεν*); and (3) communicative exchange (*χαρισθέντα/λαλοῦμεν/λόγοις/διδασκτοῖς πνεύματος*).¹⁷ Exploring the theological extensions of these features of the text reveals much about both the divine and human structure of the MEL triad.

First, for the triune God, the Father has an eternally generated thought (the Son) that is intimately known by the Spirit, who is *in him* (the Father).¹⁸ This brings to our attention the ancient teaching of *perichoresis*, the intimate union of the divine persons, such that “each is in each, and all are in each, and all are one.”¹⁹ It is this teaching that can be linked to the metaphysical element of the MEL triad for God, since perichoresis is deeply tied to the being of God himself. God is the Trinity: three-in-one. Though there is an order in the Godhead, the Father is not the “fountain of deity” or the source of divinity for the other persons.²⁰ Following John Calvin, we would say that all of the divine persons are *autotheotes*.²¹ Each of the three persons has eternally carried the full divine essence. So, the entire Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—represents the metaphysical element of the triad. Again, more could be said here, but certainly not less.

¹⁷ The “things given to us” by God (*χαρισθέντα*) implies linguistic revelation, since the truth of salvation has been delivered via special revelation, likewise with the “teachings of the Spirit” (*διδασκτοῖς πνεύματος*).

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos points out that the Son being the *Logos* of the Father (John 1:1) means that this Word’s “rationale is already inherent in the speaker ... is an imprint of his personal existence [and] ... lives on in the consciousness [of the Father]” (Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014], 57). See also Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.7. The Son of God as the *Logos* of the Father has been widely studied in Trinitarian theology for centuries, notably strong in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, which Gilles Emery has highlighted. See Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 180–92.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Trin.* 6.10. For other definitions of perichoresis, see Augustine, *Trin.* 1.18; John of Damascus, *Writings*, 177; Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 90–91; Paul M. Collins, *Trinitarian Theology: West and East: Karl Barth, the Cappadocian Fathers, and John Zizioulas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 209–15; Oliver D. Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” *TynBul* 56 (2005): 135–39; John P. Egan, “Toward Trinitarian Perichoresis: Saint Gregory the Theologian, (Oration) 31.14,” *GOTR* 39 (1994): 92; Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 479–81; V. Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” *SVTQ* 35 (1991): 59–63; Douglas F. Kelly, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2008), 489; Michael G. Lawler, “Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin,” *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 52–53; Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 365–66; John McClean, “Perichoresis, Theosis and Union with Christ in the Thought of John Calvin,” *RTR* 68, no. 2 (2009): 134–35; Randall E. Otto, “The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology,” *SJT* 54 (2001): 366; Daniel F. Stramara, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Terminology for Trinitarian Perichoresis,” *VC* 52 (1998): 259; Tipton, “Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” 292; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 169–73; and Cornelius Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 78.

²⁰ See Henri Blocher, “La Trinité: Une Communauté an-Archique?,” *Théologie Évangélique* 1, no. 2 (2002): 3–20.

²¹ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.8; Tipton, “Triune Personal God,” 101–10.

With regards to epistemology, as we have said, the Son is the eternal thought or wisdom of the Father, known intimately by the Spirit. The comprehensive or “systematic wisdom of God is found in the Son: ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col 2:3; see 1 Cor 1:30).”²²

This thought of God the Father, however, does not remain dormant in a static or lifeless Godhead. It is eternally spoken (or eternally generated) in the power of the Spirit. Put anthropomorphically, the Spirit is like the breath that produces the utterance (the Son) from the speaker (the Father).²³ All of this happens eternally, for language (communicativeness) belongs to God’s essence.²⁴

Thus, the triune God *is*, *thinks*, and *communicates* with himself. He holds eternal and uninterrupted Trinitarian discourse. As George Tavard put it, we might render the beginning of John’s Prologue, “In the beginning was Discourse, and Discourse was with God, and Discourse was divine.”²⁵ The divine discourse of the Godhead accents the language element of the MEL triad, but discourse also presupposes thought, and, as we noted at the outset, thought presupposes being—in this case, the tripersonal being of God. There is great and deep mystery here, and we could go much further, but the central idea is that the tripersonal God (metaphysics) is filled with the eternal thought of the Son (epistemology) expressed in and through the Spirit (language).

Beyond the bounds of the ontological Trinity, we see this structure take shape in creation and redemption, that is, in the economic Trinity. The Creator-God carries out the action of creating in a way that gloriously reflects his own communicative nature: the Father speaks the Word in the power of the Spirit in order to manifest reality. Divine sound gives way to earthly substance. The Word and the Breath of the Speaker work conjointly to create, just as, later in the biblical story, they work conjointly to recreate (cf. Gen 1:26; 2:7; Rom 8:9–11). In sum, the triune God’s thought finds material expression by the power of his Spirit both at the dawn of time and at the eschatological entrance of eternity—the moment when a creature is bound to Christ in Spirit-wrought faith and thus begins to live a life that will consummate in eternal communion with God himself. All of this comes to be in light of the Speaker-Speech-Breath model, a model reflected in 1 Cor 2:11. The Father exhaustively knows his thought (the Son) through the power of the Spirit, “which is in him.”

²² Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 265.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19–21. This model of the Trinity as Speaker, Speech, and Breath is not meant to downplay the equally important biblical truth that each of the persons of the Godhead is assigned speaking and hearing roles. As Vanhoozer notes, “The gospels assign speaking parts to each of the three divine persons.” The Father speaks (Matt 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11); the Son obviously speaks throughout the gospels; and the Spirit speaks through believers (Matt 10:20). The Son also hears (John 12:49–50), as does the Spirit (John 16:13). See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 246.

²⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 522–24.

²⁵ George H. Tavard, *The Vision of the Trinity* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 122.

Second, for creatures made in the image of the Trinity, we *are, think, and speak* in an analogous manner. This is related clearly to the Speaker-Speech-Breath model, since each of us is a speaker who produces words by our breath. It is in this sense, among many others, that we image the triune God of Scripture in our being (metaphysics). We are communicative beings, imaging the communicative God.²⁶

First Corinthians 2:11–13 draws our attention to human epistemology and language as well. Every person's thoughts are inherently connected to his spirit. In other words, only we ourselves can trace and monitor our own thoughts, as Paul's question makes plain: "who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?" And yet, Paul is also very aware that every Christian's spirit has been infused with the life-giving, regenerative power of the Holy Ghost. That is why he continues in 1 Cor 2 by saying that we have received *the Spirit of God*. This Spirit brings into our consciousness thoughts that burn away the dross of sin; the Christian thinks of higher things than he did before his second birth—Christ's glory, communion with the triune God, spreading the dynamic good news of the gospel to every corner of the earth. These thoughts are Spirit-given and Spirit-driven.

Now, as the Spirit indwells us as new creatures in Christ and sanctifies our thoughts, we impart the spiritual truths we have been taught not with our own words, but with the words of the Spirit. The word, then, is the medium that takes the things "freely given us by God," that is, God's thoughts, and communicates them to others. We might express what we have discovered in Figures 1 and 2 below.

In sum, by God's grace we are made new speakers in Christ (metaphysics), so that we can be spiritually instructed concerning God's thoughts (epistemology), which are delivered to us via revelation, in order to communicate those thoughts through the Spirit's words (language). A reversed paradigm holds for unbelievers as well, but with drastically different consequences. Their spirit is lost, and so their thoughts are confused as they try to suppress the truth (Rom 1:18), which produces words that, at their best, appear to be wise but which are, in fact, foolish (Rom 1:22).

III. *Secular Approaches to MEL*

Now that we have explored a key passage that highlights the MEL triad and have a general understanding of how it applies to the Creator and the creature, we can consider a secular approach to this triad, noting the dangers we encounter. We will examine only one figure, since our aim is not to sufficiently survey the field of secular approaches to metaphysics, epistemology,

²⁶ On God as a communicative being, see William M. Schweitzer, *God Is a Communicative Being: Divine Communicativeness and Harmony in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 11–30.

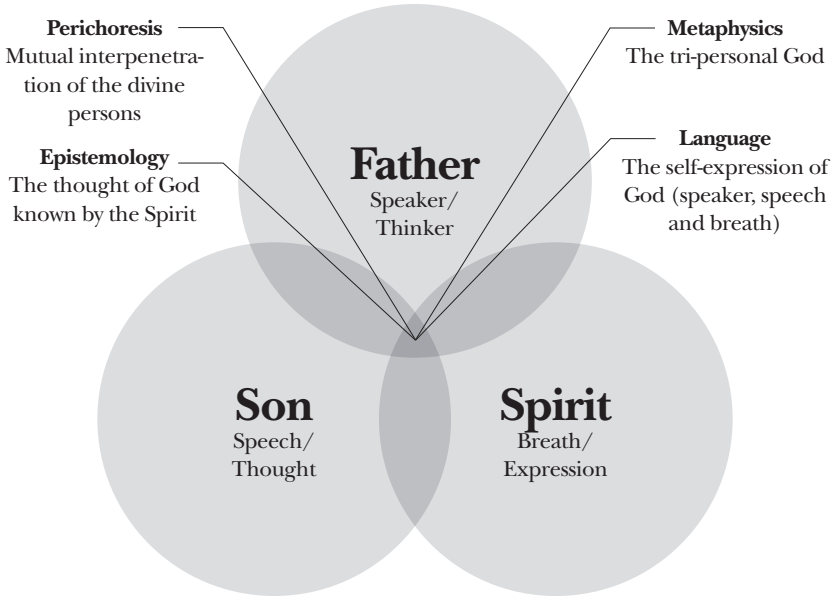


Figure 1. The MEL Triad for the Triune God

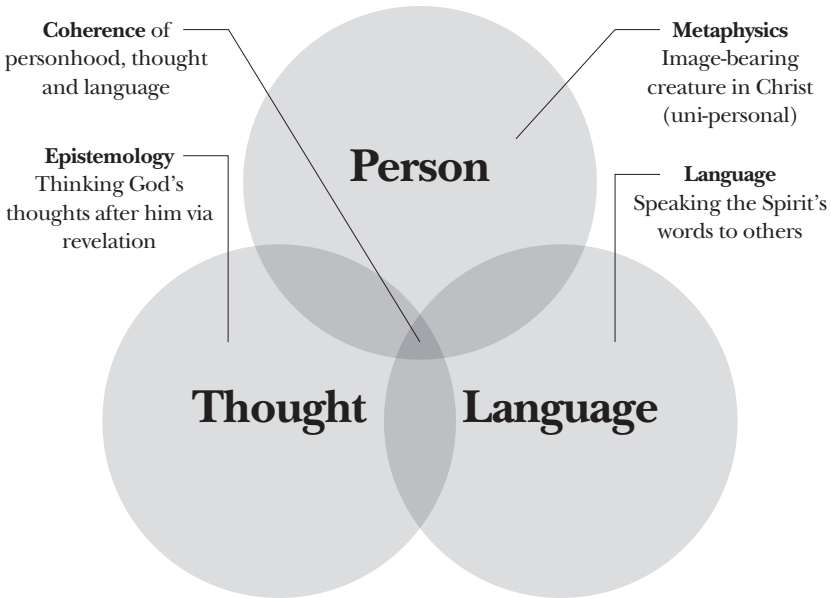


Figure 2. The MEL Triad for Image-Bearing Creatures

and language—which would be the task of several dissertations. Instead, our aim is to show where an unbiblical view of this triad breaks down.

1. *John R. Searle*

John R. Searle, a prominent philosopher in our time, has written a popular book that summarizes his basic approach to the MEL triad, though he does not refer to this triad as such. His work *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* has been well received in the field as a concise and cogent presentation of how the three elements in the title engage with one another. For our purposes, we would link “mind” with epistemology and “society” with metaphysics. Linking the categories this way does not change Searle’s theory; it simply sets it in a context with which we are already familiar.²⁷

We must start by noting the stark contrast between a Christian and non-Christian approach to philosophy, especially concerning the nature of reality, as reflected in Searle’s opening chapter. We have discussed creation as an event of the triune God of Scripture whereby he speaks creation into being and thus calls it into covenant with himself. Reality, for the Christian, is simultaneously physical and spiritual—physical in the sense that God has spoken substance into being, spiritual in the sense that our lives are lived either in covenantal submission to or rebellion against God and his clear revelation in nature and Scripture.²⁸ Because the physical world is revelatory of the God who made it, there is a sense in which physical reality cannot be exhaustively known, though it can certainly be studied and examined. Recall the words of Van Til, which I have grown fond of citing: “We certainly cannot penetrate intellectually the mystery of the Trinity, but neither can we penetrate anything else intellectually because all other things depend on the mystery of the Trinity, and therefore all other things have exactly as much mystery in them as does the Trinity.”²⁹

Searle, on the other hand, accepts what he calls “the Enlightenment Vision.” He affirms that in Western civilization there has long been a divide between the physical and spiritual realms. This divide has allowed us to assume that “the universe was completely intelligible and that we were capable of a systematic understanding of its nature.”³⁰ While Searle notes the challenges to such an

²⁷ Society, in other words, is comprised of people, who exist and act in a certain way, and this has a very close tie with metaphysics.

²⁸ In Van Tillian terms, we could also say there is an ontological and epistemological component of reality. Ontologically, we are creatures made in God’s image, and the rest of creation serves to reveal God in his glory. Ontologically (metaphysically), the Christian and the non-Christian have everything in common. Epistemologically, we are either at enmity with God or are reconciled to him in the person of Christ by the power of the Spirit. In this sense, we *know* reality in a fundamentally different way as compared to the non-Christian. So, we would also say that the Christian and the non-Christian have nothing in common. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 405–24.

²⁹ See n. 8 above.

³⁰ John R. Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 2.

understanding of reality, and further argues that we do *not* “live in two worlds, the mental and the physical, ... but in one world,” he ultimately comes to agree with the Enlightenment vision and aims to “make a modest contribution to” it.³¹

So, what is Searle’s contribution? To put it concisely, Searle hopes to affirm a unifying coherence amongst our world, our minds, and our language. Put differently, he wants to stand upon a few basic principles of metaphysics—“external realism” and the “correspondence theory of truth”—to show how our thought and our language engage with that metaphysical base in an understandable way.³² Of course, our follow-up question would be, how exactly do we understand this engagement?

For Searle, we must first agree that there is a real world out there that exists independently of us (realism). Most people, he seems to suggest, would have little trouble with that claim—aside from marginal philosophers.³³ “Any attempt to find out about the real world at all,” he notes, “presupposes that there is a way that things are.... That is, the negation of this or that claim about the real world presupposes that there is a way that things are independently of our claims.”³⁴ This “way that things are” is not sketched out in detail, but in places throughout his book he reveals his affinity for the hard sciences. What is real to him is what can be empirically verified or rationally expounded based on our experience.

In answer to the Christian’s curiosity as to whether or not God is involved with “the way things are,” he provides a personal anecdote featuring the famous atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell, who once told him that if he were wrong about God, that God really did exist, then when he arrived at the gates of heaven, he would march straight up to God himself and proclaim, “You didn’t give us enough evidence!”³⁵ This anecdote seems to be the most treatment Searle gives to the question of God’s existence or involvement in reality. He is concerned with physicality, not spirituality, as his following chapters confirm.³⁶

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6. Searle focuses on the physical and relegates the spiritual to the realm of religion, which we can infer is subjective and relative in the common sense of those words.

³² He defines “external realism” as the belief that “there is a real world existing independently of us” and “correspondence theory of truth” as the view that “statements are true if they correspond to, or describe, or fit how things really are in the real world, and false if they do not” (*ibid.*, 13).

³³ See *ibid.*, 20–37, where Searle refutes common critiques of realism.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37. It is worth noting here, since this is a popular response to the question of God’s existence, that the Christian worldview, especially in the Reformed tradition championed by Van Til, claims that our knowledge of God’s existence is not a matter of evidence. It is not a matter of data; rather, it is a matter of the *interpreter* of that data. Perception of truth is not merely a matter of brute facts (since there is no such thing). Instead, it is a matter of the mind and heart of the *person* doing the interpreting, since all of our life is lived either in covenantal rebellion against or submission to the self-revealing triune God of Scripture. In this sense, we might imagine God’s response to Russell: “I gave you all the evidence, and you refused to see it.”

³⁶ Searle includes “mental” states as part of physical reality, as we will see momentarily when we discuss his view of the mind as a “biological phenomenon.”

In sum, Searle's basic metaphysical principle is external realism, by which he predicates the existence of a reality that is independent of us, a reality that is assumed "by us when we perform many sorts of intentional actions."³⁷ This metaphysical principle is linked to his acceptance of the "correspondence theory of truth": a view that claims, because there is a real world independent of us, "statements about objects or states of affairs in that world are true or false depending on whether things in the world really are the way we say they are."³⁸

Second, and following from his metaphysical principles, he introduces the mind as a "biological phenomenon." He supports the "biological" component of this phrase by emphasizing and expounding upon our *consciousness*. Our consciousness, for Searle, has an "inner, qualitative, and subject nature."³⁹ First, the inner nature relates to the fact that all conscious activity occurs inside the brain and is related to the vast array of all of our other conscious experiences.⁴⁰ These conscious experiences are tied to the real world. Second, the qualitative nature expresses the truth that "for each conscious state there is a certain way that it feels," and this feeling marks each conscious experience as unique. Third, conscious states are subjective in the sense that "they are always experienced by a human or animal subject. Conscious states, therefore, have what we might call a 'first-person ontology.' That is, they exist only from the point of view of some agent or organism or animal or self that has them."⁴¹

This last element of our consciousness is particularly important to Searle, for he refutes the critique that because consciousness is subjective (a type of "first-person ontology"), it cannot be studied with scientific objectivity. On the contrary, he argues that a subjective "mode of existence" is no less real—no less capable of being studied scientifically—than are mountains and glaciers, which have an "objective mode of existence" (i.e., they do not depend for their existence on a conscious subject). He writes,

Mountains and glaciers have an *objective mode of existence* because their mode of existence does not depend on being experienced by a subject. But pains, tickles, and itches, as well as thoughts and feelings, have a *subjective mode of existence* because they exist only as experienced by some human or animal subject. The fallacy in the argument was to suppose that because states of consciousness have an ontologically subjective mode of existence, they cannot be studied by a science that is

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁰ "My mental states are internally related to each other in the sense that in order for a mental state to be that state with that character it has to stand in certain relation to other states, just as the whole system of states has to be related to the real world. For example, if I really remember running the ski race, then there must actually have been a running of the ski race by me, and that running of the ski race by me must cause my present memory of it. Thus, the ontology—the very existence of my conscious states—involves their being part of a sequence of complex conscious states that constitutes my conscious life" (*ibid.*, 42).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

epistemically objective. But that conclusion doesn't follow. The pain in my toe is ontologically subjective, but the statement "JRS now has a pain in his toe" is not epistemically subjective. It is a simple matter of (epistemically) objective fact, not a matter of (epistemically) subjective opinion.⁴²

Beyond these features of consciousness, the point that Searle ultimately wishes to support in all of this is that "consciousness is a biological phenomenon like any other." It "occurs in the brain in the way that digestion is a biological process that occurs in the stomach and the rest of the digestive tract."⁴³ In fact, he labels his position on this issue "biological naturalism"—"naturalism" because, on this view, the mind is part of nature, and 'biological' because the mode of explanation of the existence of mental phenomena is biological.⁴⁴

Note at this point how Searle has attempted to sketch out a metaphysics (external realism) and a component of epistemology (consciousness as a biological phenomenon) in complete isolation from God and his revelation. While earlier in the book, Searle tries to guard himself against the charge of being a materialist, we cannot help but notice how bound up his worldview is with physicality—that which can be measured, calculated, and experienced is "real." Thus, when he comes to his discussion of language, we are not surprised to find him arguing that language is tied to the *intentionality* of the mind as a biological phenomenon. Intentionality, for him, simply refers to the ways in which we relate to our environment and to other people—the main components of physical reality.⁴⁵

For Searle, the intentionality of the mind precedes the intentionality that we often witness in language when we extract meaning from a sentence or utterance.⁴⁶ Thus, there is a clear connection between the mind and human language. This mind-language connection, in a broader sense, is obvious to both scholars and laymen. We recognized this connection in our discussion of the MEL triad and its relation to 1 Cor 2:11–13. The question we must ask at this point is one we have already answered: "What is the matrix lying behind the connection between the mind and language?" In other words, what is the metaphysical framework within which we understand our thought (intentions) and language? While our answer is, "the tri-personal God of Scripture and his purposeful revelation," Searle's answer is, "the material world" (external realism). This is why he suggests that language has a "derived intentionality," that is, an intentionality that is traceable to that of the mind, which, Searle has already stated, is a *biological* phenomenon.

⁴² Ibid., 44–45.

⁴³ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 85. Searle's view of consciousness is more developed than we can outline here. For details, see his chapter "How the Mind Works: Intentionality."

⁴⁶ Ibid., 90. Searle refers to the intentionality of language as "derived intentionality," since language is the medium by which we express our original cognitive intentions.

Notice, then, that when Searle proposes that “all linguistic meaning is derived intentionality,” he is saying something both helpful and dangerous.⁴⁷ It is helpful in the sense that it links language to thinking “agents.” There is, in other words, no such thing as “pure language”—language that can be isolated from a speaker. However, it is quite dangerous in that it “naturalizes” language as a biological phenomenon.⁴⁸ At first glance, this might not seem so troubling, but remember the system in which Searle is working: it is a system in which all spiritual realities are ignored. We will look at the ramifications of this position momentarily.⁴⁹

We can and should say a bit more about Searle’s view of language. The derived intentionality of language is linked to language as a kind of human action. Words are, for Searle, a kind of signifying placeholder for complex human intentions.⁵⁰ Here, he is following the well-trodden path of speech-act theory by J. L. Austin and G. E. M. Anscombe. Language is the expression of human intentions via illocutionary acts, and those acts have meaning within particular situations governed by “constitutive rules.”⁵¹ We might formulate these rules with the equation, “X counts as Y in C.” For example, we could say, “Gold counts as currency in today’s developed global market.” Gold might not count as currency in a tribal setting, where an element’s worth is based more narrowly on its practical function. Based on the above constitutive rule, we could utter the following sentence: “John prefers gold to silver.” This assertion has meaning in expressing the agent’s desire for something. John, as a human agent living in physical reality, has a certain desire that can be formulated into a rational thought. This thought is then poured into the mold of his particular human language. Meaning, then, is a matter of thought, which is a matter of interaction with the world. Searle writes,

The key to understanding meaning is this: meaning is a form of derived intentionality. The original or intrinsic intentionality of a speaker’s thought is transferred to words, sentences, marks, symbols, and so on. If uttered meaningfully, those words, sentences, marks, and symbols now have intentionality derived from the speaker’s thoughts. They have not just conventional linguistic meaning but intended speaker meaning as well.⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Searle also seems to leave out a discussion of the innately social dimension of language, focusing instead on individual intentionality. This is an important lacuna in his exposition, for people do not “invent” language; they *learn* it from others. Thus, “one of the purposes of language—in fact, a central, predominant purpose—is to be a vehicle for personal communication and communion between God and human beings” (Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 38). In this sense, the personal, social element of language lies at the base of our understanding of what it is and how it is used. This is one of the reasons why I define language as *communion behavior* and contrast this with more impersonal definitions.

⁵⁰ Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, 132.

⁵¹ Ibid., 122–24. These include assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts (148–50).

⁵² Ibid., 141. Note, once again, that language learning in social settings seems to be ignored. When Searle writes “transferred to words, sentences, marks,” where do these words come from?

More could be said about speech-act theory and Searle's appropriation of it, but we have said enough for our purposes.⁵³ Let us pause here to summarize Searle's approach to the MEL triad.

In terms of metaphysics, Searle affirms that there is a real, material world in which we dwell, and that this world is engaged with by our minds (epistemology), which form intentional relations with it. These intentional relations can be expressed in language through various illocutionary acts that accurately or inaccurately convey a state of affairs, that is, the way the world really is, the way a person feels, and so forth (correspondence theory of truth). Language is thus bound up with speaker intentionality, which is bound up with our behavior in time and space. We might even summarize Searle's approach to the MEL triad with our initial statement at the outset of this chapter: language is bound up with thought, and thought is bound up with being. Certainly, we might disagree with Searle on various particulars here, but, on the whole, we would agree with him, wouldn't we? No.⁵⁴

2. *A Response to Searle*

There are several elements of Searle's approach that are problematic from a Christian perspective. Some of these we have already noted—for example, the materialist bent of his thought and his essentially atheistic view of reality. For the sake of brevity, we can draw out two central problems: (1) Searle's inability to account for personal diversity and contextual complexity within human communication, and (2) the absence of purposiveness and prescriptiveness in his worldview as a whole.

The first problem is in some ways anticipated by the postmodernist movement.⁵⁵ There are many facets of postmodernism that can be interpreted as little more than bold rebellion against structures of authority. However, in God's common grace, postmodernists have reminded us of a truth that has long been ignored in some circles: in the intellectual sphere, humanity has let hubris run wild by presupposing that God-like knowledge of reality is an attainable goal.

Are they not learned from others? And if they are, then why is this basic social dimension left out of his discussion?

⁵³ Note the limitations of speech-act theory in Vern S. Poythress, "Canon and Speech Act: Limitations in Speech-Act Theory, with Implications for a Putative Theory of Canonical Speech Acts," *WTJ* 70 (2008): 337–54.

⁵⁴ Part of the reason for our opposition is that Searle's approach focuses on the autonomous individual consciousness without giving proper weight to our learning of language as a personal, communal behavior. The Enlightenment idea of the autonomous rational mind is problematic in several ways, but perhaps the most important is the way in which it encourages us to think of ourselves as masters of linguistic meaning—a meaning that is controlled by human intentionality. This, once again, leaves God out of the picture. For the Christian, God is the one who creates all meaning, "for from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

⁵⁵ In my remarks here I am drawing on conversations I have had with Vern Poythress, along with his appendix in *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 362–64.

Much analytic philosophy is built upon the ideal of comprehensive knowledge. This ideal is destructive of Christian truth in several ways (e.g., in ignoring the Creator-creature distinction), and perhaps the most striking piece of collateral damage is blindness to a basic epistemological fact: *every person is rooted in a unique cultural, social, and linguistic context*. Postmodernism drew attention to this, but then made the wrong move of suggesting that *relativity* should replace *normativity*—that because we are all contextual creatures, none of us has access to truth that is normative for anyone else. This is not the case, as all Christians would be quick to claim. There is normative truth that applies to all cultures, societies, and language groups, and such truth is offered only in the inerrant words of Scripture. The triune God has broken through all contexts (historical, geographical, and linguistic) to deliver the one unchanging truth of salvation.⁵⁶

Yet, we should not overlook the common-grace elements of postmodernism, for such elements are not, in the end, the property of postmodernists; rather, they are the property of the tri-personal God who has revealed himself in Scripture. We can and should critique Searle for ignoring the basic epistemological fact we noted above—not because postmodernism is true and trustworthy, but because God’s Word is true and trustworthy, and postmodernism has stumbled across something already etched on every page of Scripture: the uniqueness of persons.

Let us apply this to Searle’s use of speech-act theory. When Searle discusses language as “derived intentionality” and then links this approach to speech-act theory, he “is not interested in any particular natural language. Rather, he considers a hypothetically enriched language that would have whatever resources the speaker needs. This move to a hypothetical language is certainly an idealization.”⁵⁷ This idealization in terms of language is closely related to the ideal of comprehensive knowledge that we mentioned earlier. In imagining a universal approach to communication in speech-act theory, Searle is trying to simplify the dynamics and complexity of human language. He assumes that speakers—no matter what their native language is—can either draw on the communicative expressions of their native language or invent new expressions that align with their intentionality. A problem exists, however, as Poythress points out.

Real people sometimes have the experience of struggling toward what they mean. They may grope for words, not completely knowing what they are after until they find a way of saying it. Or, even after they have said it, they may sometimes have a dim sense that they expressed themselves inadequately, but they have no idea how

⁵⁶ Note, however, that God does not ignore the particularities of cultures. The gospel message is embedded in the Koine Greek language, and the OT Scriptures were brought to people largely through the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. Thus, God does not *bypass* human cultural contexts to deliver his truth; he works *in and through* them to express his message and then calls upon his children to proclaim that unchanging truth in other languages and contexts.

⁵⁷ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 363.

to proceed to “invent” ideal linguistic resources that would allow them to grasp even for their own benefit what they are groping after. They are experiencing the limitations of their finiteness and of their own grasp of language.⁵⁸

The point here is that Searle has not given ample enough attention to these struggles and limitations. Instead, he has tried to *transcend* them by imagining that there is a universal approach to communication that can rise above the particularities and complexities of any specific language or person. We should be able to sense the desire for God-like mastery here.

The plain truth of the matter is that we live in a world that has a plurality of languages and a plurality of unique persons. All of us, Searle included, are rooted in a unique cultural, social, and linguistic context. We can make true observations from our unique context, but we must guard against assuming that our unique context accounts for *all* of the features and functions of *every* language. We are insiders for our own context and outsiders when it comes to other cultural and linguistic contexts.⁵⁹ But

speech-act theory bypasses the distinction between insiders’ and outsiders’ views of language and culture. That simplification can have potentially disastrous consequences, because a person is undertaking to analyze all languages by analyzing only one (in this case, English). All the discussion is intended to be completely universal. But it conveniently uses English and the broader context of scholarship in the Western tradition as its context for what it hopes will be culturally universal truths. The results are stimulating and suggestive. But the method is unsound anthropologically. We need to check other languages and cultures, in order to find out whether some feature that appears to be salient from our insider’s cultural standpoint within English is indeed universal rather than being limited to English.⁶⁰

Not only does Searle fail to account for personal diversity in language; he also does not adequately deal with the contextual complexity of human communication. By relying on speech-act theory, Searle focuses on the propositional content of sentences. For instance, the question, “Are you going to the store?” can be broken down into its propositional content (*p*) and its illocutionary force (*F*), expressed by the symbolic notation *F(p)*. This analysis is adequate only for a particularly simple communicative exchange in which one person is trying to elicit information from another person. But introducing some contextual complexity into this situation shows how limited the analysis is. If the person to whom the question is being addressed is sick with the flu, then the questioner may not be simply trying to elicit information; he may instead be challenging

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ We will discuss this in greater detail when we come to the *emic* and *etic* approaches to language in Kenneth Pike’s language theory. For additional background on these terms, consult Poythress, *ibid.*, 150–52.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 364.

the sick person's logic: *why would you go to the store when you have the flu?!* Or the questioner might have an ulterior motive. He may be asking the question to see if the other person would be willing to pick up some additional items at the store for himself. In this case, the question merely serves as a prelude to a request; it is meant to elicit information, but the eliciting of information is bound up with a following request—the two cannot be torn apart from each other. Or the questioner may be asking the question to see if he or she will be left alone for an extended period of time. In this case, perhaps the questioner is made anxious by loneliness. Again, there is partial truth to the analysis that the question is eliciting information, but it does not account for the depth of the communicative exchange. It isolates propositions, treating them as autonomous from personal motives and intentions. In other words, the $F(p)$ analysis does not help us get at the underlying, contextually embedded motives of the speaker, or the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, or the relationship between the speaker and the surrounding physical environment.

We could provide other examples, but the point is that speech-act theory may not be the best approach to assess the contextual complexity of human communication, and this is no small critique. Each of us is entangled in specific communicative exchanges every day, and these exchanges are nuanced and complex, bound up with hierarchies of verbal and nonverbal behavior. We may at times attempt to simplify our exchanges by introducing certain concepts into our approach to language, such as the “pure” concepts of speech-act theory—propositions, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary force. These concepts can be helpful when used carefully, but they can also be mishandled. They can be used to suggest that human communication is rather simple and has components that are neatly separable, when in reality this is not the case.⁶¹

The second problem is a lack of *purposiveness* and *prescriptiveness* in Searle's worldview as a whole. For Christians, being, thought, and language have the distinct yet broad purpose of helping us to glorify God and work with him by grace to restore the world according to the Word, that is, the gospel. Who we are as image-bearers (metaphysics) defines how we are to think (epistemology) and how we are to communicate (language). In other words, the *purpose* of our being is necessarily tied to the covenantal nature of reality: in condescending to create the cosmos and to call us into covenantal relationship with himself, God set in place *prescriptive* boundaries for our thought and communication. Ultimately, it is God's Word, special revelation, that sets those boundaries.

Recall Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were to take God at his word as they interpreted their environment and engaged with it. This fact illuminates both their thinking and language at the time of the serpent's temptation. When the serpent came to Eve and challenged God's words, she and Adam had the epistemological duty of recognizing the falsehood and trickery of that challenge. They were to witness how the serpent's proposal was

⁶¹ For examples of the limitations here, see *ibid.*, 366–67.

an example of rebellious thought, encouraging them to break through the covenantal boundaries set by God himself via special revelation (his spoken word). Upon identifying the falsehood and rebellion in the serpent's words, they were to respond by reaffirming the truth and authority of God's words, and thus banish the serpent from God's holy presence. This is exactly what Jesus does when tempted by the devil in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13)! As Satan twists and distorts God's words (Ps 91:11–12) and puts the challenge to Christ, he responds by proclaiming God's spoken truth (Deut 8:3; 6:16; 6:13). Christ saw the falsehood of Satan for what it was; the eternal Word, who had taken on flesh, crushed the ancient serpent with the words of his Father, and he then banished Satan from God's presence (Matt 4:10). Another way of stating this would be to say that who Christ *is* led him to *think* and *speak* in a certain way—a holy, God-honoring way.

What we are witnessing here is the *purposive* and *prescriptive* nature of reality. In both Adam and Eve's encounter with the serpent and Jesus' encounter with Satan, we find that God's ultimate purpose is bound to a prescription for thought and language. God's *purpose*, then, is behind a biblical ontology.⁶² The purpose of our being—indeed, the purpose for all of reality—is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (WSC Q. 1). As image-bearing creatures, we are defined by our desire to commune with the God who made us and to steward the created physical world in which we find ourselves.

This means, in short, we would not be able to accept the metaphysical base that Searle is offering. Our metaphysical base is not simply “external realism”—the notion that there is a real world out there independent of our thought and experience. Rather, our understanding of metaphysics is tied to the tri-personal God who has purposively and covenantally created all things and is upholding them by the word of his power (Heb 1:3). Thus, when Van Til says “a fact *is* its function,”⁶³ he is saying that things are *not* what they are abstractly; rather, they are ontologically defined in terms of their function in God's creative and redemptive plan. While Searle affirms the existence of a real world that is independent of us, he cannot account for the purpose that is woven into the fabric of that world.

This means not only that he cannot account for the ultimate metaphysical base of reality, but also that the more specific purposes that he attributes to mental phenomena such as consciousness cannot be adequately accounted for. Remember, Searle tries to affirm three features of our consciousness.

Conscious states are *inner* in a very ordinary spatial sense in that they go on inside my body, specifically inside my brain. Consciousness can no more lie around

⁶² I outline details of this in Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “World through Word: Towards a Linguistic Ontology,” *WTJ* 79 (2017): 345–64.

⁶³ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 115.

separate from my brain than the liquidity of water can be separated from the water, or the solidity of the table from the table.... Consciousness is also inner in a second sense, and that is that any one of our conscious states exists only as an element in a sequence of such states. One has conscious states such as pains and thoughts only as a part of living a conscious life, and each state has the identity it has only in relation to other such states.... Conscious states are also *qualitative* in the sense that for each conscious state there is a certain way that it feels, there is a certain qualitative character to it.... There is something that it is like to drink red wine, and it is quite different from what it is like to listen to music. In that sense, there is nothing it is like to be a house or a tree, because such entities are not conscious.

Finally, ... conscious states are *subjective* in the sense that they are always experienced by a human or animal subject. Conscious states, therefore, have what we might call a “first-person ontology.” That is, they exist only from the point of view of some agent or organism or animal of self that has them.⁶⁴

These three features of consciousness, because they are torn from an ultimate purposive base (the plan and purpose of the triune God), can only be superficially understood. Yes, conscious states occur inside each of us, each has a particular quality, and each is subjectively experienced—but what about the *purpose* of each of these features?

Why is it that human creatures are designed to have inner conscious states? This phenomenon seems to create a lot of communicative problems for a godless worldview. We seem trapped in our own inner consciousness and then must struggle to communicate our inner conscious states to others, or else we risk feeling isolated. Moreover, because Searle does not give any practical relevance to God’s existence, we are forced to account for this conscious entrapment with a purely biological explanation. But there is no purely biological explanation. It does not seem biologically necessary for conscious states to be inner rather than outer, that is, shared by a community. The best explanation that Searle could offer would appear to be that our question of purpose is irrelevant. What does it matter what purpose there might be for the fact that our conscious states are internal? Let us just accept that they are and move forward. Christians are not so easily satisfied.

For the Christian, Scripture seems to offer a few purposes for this inner feature of conscious states. Recall 1 Cor 2:11–13:

For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

⁶⁴ Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, 41–42. Poythress pointed out to me that Searle’s wording here seems to confuse anatomy with consciousness. Consciousness cannot literally be located anywhere.

The inner feature of consciousness appears to be rooted in the triune God himself. The Spirit of God, which is *in him*, knows the thoughts of God. And yet, those thoughts of God are, through the eternal Word, expressed, that is, communicated. This brings our attention once more to the biblical truth that “the persons of the Trinity function as members of a language community among themselves.”⁶⁵ The Father’s thoughts are known by the Spirit and expressed through the eternal Word: God knows and speaks to himself in an exhaustive and incomprehensible way. In relation to the economy of the Godhead, the Father’s thoughts are known by the Spirit and communicated through the words of spoken revelation (which are analogically tied to the speaking of the eternal Word),⁶⁶ which have been given to us as God’s covenantal creatures. In fact, God has given us *his Spirit* so “that we might understand the things freely given us by God”! And note what happens next: we impart this (the inner, Spiritual thoughts of God) in words taught by the Spirit—the paradigm of inner, conscious knowledge expressed through language moves from the Trinity to his image-bearing creatures, who image God so strikingly through language that they replicate the communicative nature of God in their spreading of the gospel! The purpose of inner conscious states, for Christians, is to foster communion among persons. This happens in qualitatively different but analogically related ways for the divine persons of the Trinity and human persons made in the image of the tri-personal God. Inner conscious states, in other words, serve the purpose of imaging God. The communication of our conscious states to other persons, then, is not a problem that needs to be solved; it is an imaging behavior that serves God’s greater purposes for reconciliation, communion, and personal fellowship.

Similarly, our understanding of the qualitative feature of conscious states is undercut by a godless worldview, but deepened by a Christian worldview. Searle affirms the qualitative uniqueness of conscious states in relation to other conscious states. All of our conscious states, however, are linked. As he writes, “any one of our conscious states exists only as an element in a sequence of such states. One has conscious states such as pains and thoughts only as a part of living a conscious life, and each state has the identity it has only in relation to other such states.” In other words, the distinctive quality of each conscious state *both* sets it apart (diversity, plurality) *and* relates it to a complex matrix of other conscious states (unity). If this is the case, then uniqueness and relation must be treated as equally ultimate in our understanding of consciousness. On the one hand, a particular conscious state can only be recognized and understood by its relation to other states (commonality, unity). The taste of a red wine, to use Searle’s example, has a distinct quality in relation to the tastes of other wines, the taste of cheese, the sound of a train, or the feel of birch bark. Relations help

⁶⁵ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 18.

⁶⁶ Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *WTJ* (1995): 188.

us to distinguish one conscious state from countless others. On the other hand, these relations cannot be emphasized to the extent that commonality trumps individuality. Tasting red wine is not just like hearing the sound of a train but with a few modifications; there is a real distinction between the qualities of these conscious states, even amidst their relations (diversity, plurality). In short, there must be balance in order for us to achieve an adequate understanding of what the “quality” of each conscious state is like—a balance between uniqueness and relations, between diversity and unity. But why is our experience structured in this way? Why does it seem that we misunderstand a conscious state if we overemphasize either its uniqueness or its relations to other conscious states?⁶⁷ Searle does not seem to offer an answer to this question.

For the Christian, however, a potential answer can be found in the Trinity: the God for whom unity and plurality are equally ultimate.⁶⁸ Van Til and a few other theologians, notably Colin Gunton, have found in the Trinity the ultimate solution to the one-and-many problem.⁶⁹ This ancient philosophical problem is actually at the heart of our current discussion: the notion that both the uniqueness (diversity, plurality) and the relations (unity) of the quality of a conscious state are equally important. Van Til once wrote,

The unity and the plurality of this world has back of it a God in whom unity and the plurality are equally ultimate. Thus we may say that this world, in some of its aspects at least, shows analogy to the Trinity. This world is made by God and, therefore, to the extent that it is capable of doing so, it may be thought of as revealing God as he exists. And God exists as a triune being.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For example, if we overemphasize the uniqueness of tasting a particular red wine, that experience becomes isolated from our other experiences, and because of this isolation, we actually understand the initial experience less, not more. We draw on the known in order to comprehend the new. Conversely, if we overemphasize the relations between tasting that red wine and several other qualities of other conscious states, then we risk losing our unique understanding of that conscious state. We cannot understand the new if we force it into the category of the known and refuse to see its particularities.

⁶⁸ “The unity and the diversity in God are equally basic and mutually dependent upon one another” (Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 25). “In God the one and the many are equally ultimate. Unity in God is no more fundamental than diversity, and diversity in God is not more fundamental than unity. The persons of the Trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another. The Son and the Spirit are ontologically on a par with the Father” (Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 48). See also Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 57–59.

⁶⁹ In reflecting on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Essay on Faith*, Gunton writes, “If the one, the reality which makes the world what it is, is not merely one—impersonal, mechanical, mere nature—but persons in relation, a unity of free *hypostases* taking their being and particularity from each other, then we may understand how it is that we have a world fit for the creation and redemption of persons. In other words, we learn from Coleridge not simply that there are analogies to be drawn from the divine to the human person, but that the question of the three in one is also the question of the kind of world we live in” (Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. [London: T&T Clark, 1997], 97).

⁷⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 364–65.

In other words, that our comprehension of the quality of a conscious state requires *both* uniqueness and relations is a reflection of the Trinitarian God who is *both* one and three. When we ignore the three persons in God, we end up with monism; when we ignore the unity of God, we end up with tritheism. Neither case gives us a true and biblical representation of who God is. These are the classic issues that led to certain heresies in the early church. Analogously, and because the world in many ways reflects the Trinity, when we downplay the uniqueness of the quality of a conscious state, such as tasting a red wine, that quality becomes absorbed into an amorphous mass of other qualities of different conscious states, and so we understand and appreciate it less. If, on the other hand, we exaggerate the uniqueness of a conscious state, we isolate it from our other experiences and thus have trouble truly comprehending it. These phenomena might be categorized as “epistemological heresies,” since they falsely represent the workings of the mind (consciousness).

The discussion so far has meant that Christians are in a unique place to recognize both the purposiveness and prescriptiveness of our being and thought: the purpose of our being is to glorify the personal God who has spoken reality into existence and called us into covenant with himself. That is *why* reality exists (both the world and persons), and this broader purpose gives all of reality ultimate meaning, certainly far more meaning than does the notion of “external realism.”⁷¹ The purpose of thought is to cognitively image the triune God for whom unity and plurality are equally ultimate. There is also a prescriptive element to both of these pieces. If the purpose of our being is to glorify the speaking God of Scripture (chiefly through hearing and obeying the Father’s Word and being conformed, by the Spirit, to the image of his Son), then when we refuse to do this, there is a moral problem. Humans do not simply *exist*; rather, they exist *as covenantal creatures of the triune God*, and that means that there is a certain way in which they are called to be, that is, to live. Likewise, if the purpose of our thought is to image the Trinity and thus to avoid lapsing into an epistemological form of monism or tritheism, then when we fail to think this way, or if we reject the God in whom such an epistemological framework is rooted, then, once again, we have a moral problem. The purposiveness of being and thought is inextricably bound up with the prescriptiveness of being and

⁷¹ This take on metaphysics is rooted in the nature of reality as Trinitarian. The communion of the Trinity is at the base of all that exists, undergirding every human action by giving it ultimate purpose in relation to God himself. Thus, A. J. Torrance is right to conclude that “a doctrine of the Trinity which takes seriously the mutuality of loving communion opened up for humanity in Christ by the Spirit suggests the ultimate identification of the source of being and the communion of the Trinity. The communion of God is in no sense to be conceived as a qualification of a more foundational category of ‘being’ or ‘substance.’ The Triune communion characterizes Reality (Being) at the most fundamental level—it is that in which we live and move and have our being. The communion of the Trinity as such constitutes the arche and telos of all that is” (A. J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], 258).

thought. Who we are and how we think is not a matter of realism, or a matter of biological phenomena; it is a matter of *imaging*—imaging the Trinity who is both three and one, and who has called us into covenant with himself.

More could certainly be said about Searle's take on metaphysics and consciousness, but at this point we must move on to the final element of his triad: language. Our critique of Searle's view of language has to do with a more general critique of speech-act theory. "Speech-act theory, like any theory, is selective in its attention to human behavior."⁷² This selectivity is not in itself problematic; a problem would only arise if such selectivity left out something that is essential to our understanding of communication. This, unfortunately, is what commonly happens with speech-act theory. Proponents of speech-act theory tend to atomize human communication and reduce it to a limited set of verbal actions (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations). This marginalizes the importance of context and the complex hierarchical structure of language, along with the rest of human behavior. As Poythress notes,

The decision to start with atomic propositions is a decontextualizing move, and all such moves are problematic when, as is the case with human language, context is essential to meaning. In this case, the context includes the complexity of human beings, who are the speakers and conversationalists, and the complexity of their environment, which includes world history and the God who rules it.⁷³

Context and complexity emerge, for Poythress as well as for Kenneth Pike, when we broaden our focus to include what Pike called "behavioremes." A behavioreme is simply a segment or piece of purposive human activity,⁷⁴ which is structured in a certain way and fits into a complex, culturally specific system. Speech acts, in this sense, would only constitute a small group of simplified behavioremes, leaving more complex behavioremes out of the discussion. But notice what this does to our understanding of human communication.

Take, for example, the declaration of a basketball coach in the fourth quarter of a playoff game: "He was fouled!" From the perspective of speech-act theory, this declaration would be analyzed primarily in terms of the speaker and hearer (perhaps the referee), and also, secondarily, in terms of the player who was fouled and the other player who allegedly committed the foul (this would be more closely related to the correspondence theory of truth, i.e., whether a foul was actually committed). The first step of analysis would involve the judgments and perspectives of both the coach and the referee. For Searle, this would include an examination of both the speaker meaning (what the speaker intended to communicate) and the sentence meaning (the meaning of the grammatical

⁷² Poythress, "Canon and Speech Act," 338.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁷⁴ Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 121.

or syntactic structure, in relation to the speaker's intention);⁷⁵ a consideration of what, exactly, the speaker wanted the hearer to understand;⁷⁶ and the illocutionary force of the speech act as well as its perlocutionary effects.⁷⁷ The second step would involve assessing the truth value of the coach's declaration, in relation to the contextually embedded rules of the basketball game. In other words, we might question whether a foul was, in fact, committed, and we would make our judgment based on our understanding of the context (which would include what Searle labels "constitutive rules") as well as our physical observations. These analyses would certainly be fruitful, revealing much about the coach's intention and the nature of his message, and perhaps even about the basketball game itself, but we would be limited by the atomizing goals of speech-act theory. Our focus would remain only on that speech act, not on the surrounding human behaviors that led up to it or the ones that followed it, or the ones that were occurring at the same time. With such a narrow focus, we would indeed miss out not only on our understanding of the broader context, but, in particular, on our understanding of how the coach's utterance is related to and informed by that context. For instance, was the speaker's intention to point out a fault in the refereeing, or was he primarily concerned with protecting his player from physical harm, or was it both? We would need to see more of the game and learn about the coach's relationship with his players in order to draw a conclusion. Or, was the coach's declaration part of a larger ploy to retain the attention of the referee for future use? In other words, was the declaration an authentic critique of the referee's decision, or was it merely one element of a verbal game that was meant to draw the referee onto his side so that later in the game he would be able to argue for a more important call?⁷⁸ Now we are getting deeper into the context of the basketball game and even touching on the coach's motives, and the latter has a moral dimension to it. Yet, we have not even considered the player's actions. Was the player trying to draw a foul by exaggerating his body movements (which is all too frequent in professional sports) or was he legitimately restrained in his movement by his opponent? And if the player was exaggerating in order to lure the referee into making a call, how does that affect the meaning of the coach's declaration? And what about the referee? Is not his decision *not* to call the foul embedded in a

⁷⁵ Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, 140. We will see later on why distinguishing between speaker meaning and sentence meaning is problematic. See Hibbs, "Where Person Meets Word, Part 1," 374–77.

⁷⁶ Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, 145.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 136–39.

⁷⁸ I can attest to this from my own life experience in playing the sport. Arguing about a call that is relatively unimportant can have the effect of producing a feeling of guilt in the referee for not making that call. Later in the game, that residual guilt might encourage the referee to execute what is commonly referred to as a "make-up call," i.e., a call that is meant to make up for the one he missed earlier. All of this, of course, is part of the emic (insider) structure of the sport and is not visible to those who are unfamiliar with the game. On the contrast between etic and emic, see Hibbs, "Where Person Meets Word, Part 1," 372–74.

pattern of making certain calls for certain reasons? Do you see the complexity that emerges when we examine the context of this allegedly simple speech act more closely? The reductionism of speech-act theory can thus blind us to important information that colors our understanding of a given utterance.⁷⁹ In the example above, it might be misleading to label the coach's speech act as a pure declaration, and even if we do so, we will likely not appreciate the significance of the declaration if we refuse to look at the complexity of the surrounding context.

Now, contrast the approach of speech-act theory with that of Pike, as expressed through Poythress's work. Note how Pike's language theory looks at the broader context (the complex behavioreme of a basketball game) and appreciates its complexity.

A basketball game is a complex behavioreme. It has three interlocking dimensions. First, it has a unity or identity, and *contrasts* with other types of games and other types of activity. We can speak of its *contrastive-identificational* features. Second, it has *variation*. That is, there are many different basketball games that differ in detail. Third, it is *distributed* within larger contexts of human activities—a series of games in a season, and other human activities during the same day.

Speech-act theory focuses primarily on the contrastive-identificational features that characterize particular kinds of behavioreme. But what becomes of the distributional aspect of these behavioremes? Small speech acts are embedded ("distributed") within larger groupings of human behavior. Speech-act theory does encourage reflection about contextual conditions that may be necessary for the happy execution of a speech act.... But because of the focus on atomic propositions, there is little attention to the way in which behavioremes can be embedded in larger behavioremes in a hierarchical array, and how several smaller purposeful human actions may together accomplish a larger purpose.⁸⁰

Poythress's words point toward our previous contextual questions. The utterance of the basketball coach is *embedded* in the larger context of more complex behavioremes—the series of offensive plays made by the particular player and the defensive responses of his opponent; the ongoing conversation between the coach and the referee; the pattern of calls that the referee has made in that quarter and in the rest of the game; the other actions occurring simultaneously with the speech-act; the actions of the other players that have occurred before it (and will occur after it); the pattern of discussions that the coach maintains throughout the season with various referees; and so on. The complexity is staggering, but that does not mean it should be ignored. Rather, we should attempt to account for all that we can in order to carefully understand a particular

⁷⁹ I believe that such reductionism is tied to the notions of mastery and autonomy. If we reduce situations in their complexity, we can imagine that we have a godlike control of the meaning and significance of an element of language. So, there is a theological danger that comes along with speech-act theory. On the notions of godlike mastery in human thought, see Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 246–47; Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy*, 104, 120, 242.

⁸⁰ Poythress, "Canon and Speech Act," 340.

utterance more fully, knowing all the while that the triune God has complete control and exhaustive knowledge of all these hierarchically embedded and complex behavioremes and is using them to accomplish his purposes.

What's more, after we have gleaned what we can from considering the complexity and hierarchical embedding of various behavioremes, we can refocus on the original utterance in terms of its contrastive-identificational features, its variation, and its distribution. This, again, would offer us a richer understanding of the meaning in context. We can keep our observations here brief.

The utterance "He was fouled!" has what Pike called *contrastive-identificational features*.⁸¹ In other words, it has both contrasts with and similarities to other units of language that are comparable in structure and function, and these contrasts and similarities serve to set this particular linguistic unit apart from others. We might find contrasts and similarities in terms of grammar, phonology, and reference.⁸² For example, the utterance "He was fouled!" is similar to and different from other grammatically parallel syntactical structures following the pattern *subject + verb in the passive voice*: "He was pushed," "He was hit," "He was held." The commonality amongst these examples is the syntactical structure, which is used to show an action reflecting back upon the subject. The particular verbs in each example, however, set the utterances apart from one another, since each verb has various other structures and collocations that can accompany it. For example, we can follow the verb "hit" with an inanimate object such as "ball," but we cannot do so with the verb "foul," since that verb (in this specific sense) must take an animate object; we can *foul a person*, but we cannot *foul a ball*, if by that we mean "commit an illegal act against the ball."

In terms of variation, each linguistic unit has "features ... which may change *without causing the loss of recognizability* of the unit."⁸³ In other words, we could remove or change certain features of the utterance "He was fouled!" without eradicating the basic meaning of the unit. For instance, we could accent each of the different words in the utterance:

HE was fouled!
 He WAS fouled!
 He was FOULED!

None of these varied pronunciations would alter the fundamental meaning of the linguistic unit, though they would certainly nuance that meaning in some way.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 42–51.

⁸² For an overview of the grammatical, phonological, and referential hierarchies, see *ibid.*, 69–106.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁴ The first might focus our attention on *who* was fouled, the second on *the fact* that he was fouled, and the third on the *action* being carried out.

Lastly, we could examine the utterance with reference to larger patterns of occurrence in discourse, since “reference to successively larger patterns of occurrence, to a larger *universe of discourse*, is necessary if one is to know the significance of a person, a thing, or a word.”⁸⁵ How many times, for example, was the utterance “He was fouled!” made in that basketball game? In other words, is this a game in which many fouls are being called or a game in which relatively few are being called? Or, we might look at the pattern of pronunciation for this utterance when it is delivered by this particular coach. Does the coach usually yell out this complaint (signaled by the exclamation point) or does he often just call the referee over and speak to him quietly? There are many ways to look at this unit’s *distribution* in larger patterns—each of them would be revelatory of details we might not have considered.⁸⁶

IV. Conclusion

What we have seen is a sufficient response to the shortcomings and simplicity of speech-act theory. This is not to say that speech-act theory is useless, but only that it is limited and has the potential to blind us to the richness and complexity of human communication. This concludes our response to John Searle, but we should summarize our findings.

In terms of the MEL triad, we found that Searle’s metaphysical principles (external realism) and his epistemology (his exposition of consciousness) lack a theoretical base that can account for the purpose or prescription required for a coherent worldview. Without the triune God behind our understanding of being and thought, we cannot account for the purpose of reality or our cognitive processing of it. Searle and his sympathizers can offer only limited observations of phenomena that are void of ultimate meaning because they are interpreted in isolation from (in fact, in rebellion against) the triune God who is Lord of all meaning. In terms of language, we saw how the complexity and depth of language can easily be ignored by the restricted focus of speech-act theory, and we were able to glimpse how Pike’s theory might begin to account for the richness and complexity of human communication.

I end by drawing on what we have found to note a relationship between language theory and theology proper: It is this relationship that I believe obligates us to consider Kenneth Pike’s language theory as compatible with the Reformed doctrine of the Trinity.

Theologically, we would affirm that God is God of *all*. This claim might seem juvenile to academics, but it is worth restating in more specific terms. The speaking God of Scripture is God of all in the sense that he is the Creator of being, thought, and language (MEL). He has spoken reality into being and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁶ Pike notes that we can examine a unit (1) as a member of a “substitution class,” (2) as part of a structural sequence, or (3) as a point in a system (ibid., 62–65).

interpreted that reality exhaustively in relation to himself. He has also revealed the truth of this reality to his creatures via speech: this is what we find faithfully and masterfully set forth in Scripture. It is in this sense that God has “thought” about all that exists (he has interpreted the meaning of all things in relation to himself) and has then given us the means to think his thoughts after him. One of the ways in which we engage with God and the world and thus come to a deeper knowledge of him and a fulfillment of the covenantal obligations we have is through communication—language. Thus, there are inextricable bonds between being, thought, and language that can be traced back to the Trinity. All that exists, is thought, or is communicated is interrelated and bound to the triune God and the purposes he has for whom and what he has created. This means that we can take any one of the elements in the MEL triad and look *through* it to understand something of God and his creation, including ourselves. How we view language, then, is paramount in shaping our understanding of reality (including the God who made it) and thought. Our theory of language is not simply an addendum to our worldview; it directs and shapes that worldview, broadening or restricting our perspective. It does this because, as we have seen in surveying the MEL triad, language reflects thought and thought reflects being. So, we need a language theory that, as much as possible, accounts for being, thought, and language since we are aiming to understand and more deeply commune with the triune God of *all*. This does not remove the notion of mystery from language, thought, and being. In fact, it underscores it, but it does so in a way that more felicitously reflects the Trinitarian God who spoke all things into existence, interpreted all things, and communicates exhaustively with himself.

That, in sum, is where Kenneth Pike’s language theory has a distinct advantage, for though his theory is focused on language, it merges with our understanding of thought and being (the latter including human behavior) and thus becomes formative in broadening our view of reality and the God who shapes it so that we might more fully know him and commune with him. Of course, Pike’s theory also leaves room for mystery, since all of reality is undergirded by a God who will never be fully comprehensible to his creatures. That fact in and of itself might be part of the reason why Pike’s theory has not been embraced as passionately as other theories; sinful creatures are bent on control and mastery, fixity and absolute rationalism. Any theory that fundamentally opposes such desires is unpopular, to say the least.