

ENTREVISTAS
INTERVIEWS

**MIND, LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN SEARLE**

JOHN SEARLE
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1. Dear Doctor Searle, many currents of materialist thinking emerged from Philosophy of Mind's contemporary setting suggesting that mental events are sophisticated brain processes. Why do you think that schools such as materialism and dualism have trouble to solve the mind-body problem?

JS: Materialism, dualism, and other such -isms have trouble solving the mind-body problem because they are all in the grip of a series of obsolete categories: mental and physical, spirit and matter, body and soul. These are meant to be mutually exclusive categories, and consequently they make it impossible to give a realistic solution to the problems that trouble us. The way you have posed the question reveals this. People who wonder whether “mental events are sophisticated brain processes” tacitly suppose that if something is mental qua mental, then it cannot be a brain process, and if something is a brain process qua brain process, then it cannot be mental. Both of these assumptions are mistaken. Some of our brain processes are subjective qualitative processes of consciousness existing in our brains. They are features of our brains in the same way that the liquidity of water is a feature of water, or the solidity of the table is a feature of the table. Consciousness is not an extra substance secreted by the brain, it is a condition that the brain is in. Once people recognize this, then most, though not all, of the traditional mind-body problems simply disappear.

2. According to your theory, Biological Naturalism, the mind-body problem has a simple solution since neurophysiology indicates that all mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiologic processes. Can you further explain your thesis' concepts?

JS: The point is not merely that all of our mental states are caused by brain processes, but they are actual features of the brain. Now the problem here is not just with mind and body but with causation. People suppose that a causal explanation must be something totally ontologically different from the basic ontology of the phenomena that it

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explains, but that is not true. The table on which my computer is resting supports the computer. What is the causal explanation for that? Well the causal explanation is that the behavior of the molecules is such that the computer will not pass through those molecules in a way that if I set the computer on thin air, it will pass through. There is a causal explanation of the solidity of the table, but of course the causal explanation explains a very feature of the system whose behavior causes that feature. Similarly with consciousness and the brain. The neuron firings explain a feature of the brain, its consciousness, which is a feature of the very system whose behavior explains the consciousness in virtue of its neuron firings.

3. *In your lecture Minds, Brains and Science (1984), you stated that “I am convinced that part of the problem resides in continuing to address a certain problem of the 20th century with an outdated vocabulary from the 17th century. [...] One of my purposes which will be maintained is trying to end these old obsolete categories”. In this sense, wouldn’t analyzing our minds without language be a “metaphysical trap” since the only way to do so is by using language?*

JS: The problem is not that we have to use language. Of course we have to use language to explain anything, or, for that matter, to do any philosophy at all. The problem is that the specific set of linguistic categories has now become obsolete. The assumption is that if something is mental qua mental, then it cannot be physical qua physical, and that seems to me a mistake. A solution is simply to abandon this vocabulary and state the facts. Mental states are biological phenomena. They exist as higher level features of the brain. They are entirely caused by, and realized in, neurobiological systems. I said all of that without using the traditional oppositions between the mental and the physical of dualism, materialism, and all the rest. Once we abandon the traditional categories, the problems have a rather easy solution.

4. *Therefore which vocabulary would be best to describe mental phenomena so we could fully define “what makes us think”?*

JS: Try to use the vocabulary that stays as close as possible to the actual facts. The actual facts are that I am now in a state of consciousness. These conscious states go on in my brain. The essential thing about consciousness is that for any conscious state, there is something *it feels* like to be in that state. To describe this, we need to introduce a couple of technical terms, but not very many. We can say that every state has a *qualitative character*. There is a certain quality to the experience. That is what I was getting at when I said there is something it feels like to have that experience, and because of that every conscious state is *ontologically subjective* in the sense that it only exists insofar as it is experienced by a human or animal subject. So you have to have a vocabulary that recognizes qualitative subjectivity as the essence of consciousness, but you do not have to have all of the traditional apparatus, which I have avoided.

5. *As stated in your theory, consciousness is considered to be a physical characteristic of the higher brain function; thereby it can only be described with neurobiological terms. Does this understanding restrain assumptions based on the existence of intentionalism?*

JS: This question reveals precisely the false opposition that I am militating against. Consciousness qua consciousness is a neurobiological phenomenon. That is the part that people have a hard time accepting because it runs counter to the traditional way of talking about this. Neurobiology includes not just neuron firings, it includes qualitative subjective states of feeling or sentience or awareness. It includes, in short, consciousness. Is it physical? Is it mental? The answer of course is that it is both, but what that suggests is that we should abandon this vocabulary. There is a biological process in my brain, and it is a process in my brain the same way that digestion is a process in my stomach. It is just an ordinary feature of biology. It is different from other biological phenomena in that it has subjective qualitative features to it, but this does not prevent it from being part of my biology.

6. *If we accept the mind as a “subjective first person experience”, how can we consider mental phenomena so it can be scientifically analyzed with a completely scientific point of view?*

JS: The account I have given is entirely consistent with the scientific approach. Science does not name a set of beliefs or truths, it names a set of methods, and above all, a set of institutional structures for applying these methods to try to solve problems. I think the account that I have given of the mind-body problem suggests how it can be treated as a scientific problem like any other. Many people have a mistaken conception of what they call “science”. They think that science names a particular set of propositions, and that consequently the mental reality cannot be a part of scientific reality. That is totally mistaken. Science does not name a set of propositions, and there is no such thing as “scientific reality”. There is just a real world we all live in, and science is an attempt to analyze the structure and functioning of that world.

7. *Consequently, do you believe that neurophysiologic assumptions surpass the Cartesian dualism explanation on the mental causation dilemma?*

JS: Once we abandon the traditional categories and the traditional vocabulary, then it seems to me there is no problem in explaining mental causation. I intend to raise my arm, and my arm goes up. The movement is entirely caused by intentions in action, and that is because those intentions themselves are realized in neurobiological structures. It is exactly like my car engine: the piston moves because of the explosion in the cylinder, but the explosion entirely consists in a set of oxidization of individual hydrocarbon molecules. There is a description at the level of the explosion, where the phenomenon functions causally, and there are lower level descriptions. Similarly

with consciousness and muscle movement. There is a higher level description where my consciousness causes my arm to move, and a lower level description of the same phenomenon where the secretion of acetylcholine at the axon endplates of the motor neurons causes my arm to move. These are not two inconsistent descriptions of two different phenomena, but they are two consistent descriptions of one and the same phenomenon, only the descriptions are at different levels.

The analogy between the car engine and consciousness breaks down because of course consciousness has this qualitative subjective feel to it, which explosions do not have. But the basic formal structure, namely a system, can have causal reality at higher and lower levels, where the higher level causal function is entirely explained by the behavior of the lower level elements, and that is true of car engines and conscious brains. It does not make any difference.

8. You criticize the Strong Artificial Intelligence with the Chinese Room experiment. Considering the evolution on Artificial Intelligence researches, don't you think that we are close to disrupt the barriers which you confront on your theory?

JS: I have not been following the literature on Artificial Intelligence, but the people that I know in A.I. accept my argument that no amount of syntactical processing would ever be sufficient for the constitution of mental states, and the digital computer is entirely a syntactic engine. So the idea of actually creating a mind by designing a computer program is ridiculous, and I think most of the same people in Artificial Intelligence recognize this.

This does not prevent us from pursuing what I call “weak A.I.”, namely computer simulations of human cognitive processes, which are like computer simulations of any other natural processes such as digestion, photosynthesis, or the movement of the planets. Weak A.I. is a perfectly legitimate branch of scientific engineering. It is useful practically because you can get computers to behave like intelligent human beings, and it is important theoretically because you can model certain cognitive processes. A mistake is to suppose that the simulation is the real thing. It is not. It is just a simulation.

9. Wouldn't the “naturalization of consciousness” be a sort of drama for human beings once they can't expect more than “biological explanations”?

JS: The fact that we can do a “naturalization of consciousness” does not show that the only explanation of human beings would be a neurobiological explanation. There will still be a series of explanations of such things as falling in love, worrying about your income tax, wondering whether to vote for the Democrats, or considering which profession to pursue. The fact that all of our conscious states are grounded in our neurobiology does not mean that there is no real level of analyzing these phenomena except for the level of neurons and neuron firings. To take an analogy, all of reality

consists of the microparticles of physics, but that does not mean that when I fall in love, I have to give an explanation in terms of electrons.

10. Analyzing your philosophic path throughout more than half a century, we have sufficient evidences to sustain that it has influenced countless writers, especially in Brazil. What are your thoughts on the future of Contemporary Philosophy? Does it still have advantage on scientific reasoning? Or should philosophers be less averse to science? Or, according to Wittgenstein assumptions, should we maintain ourselves silent and simply analyze ways of thinking?

JS: I think philosophy is the most exciting subject there is, and in a way, it is the only subject because, for me, other subjects are interesting only because of their philosophical importance. The reason that, for example, physics is so important to me is because it gives me the answers to an absolutely fundamental question in philosophy, namely what is the basic structure of reality?

I would not attempt to prescribe any special future for philosophy. Whenever people do that, they are always mistaken. Wittgenstein tried heroically to redefine philosophy, but I think the effort failed. He had valuable contributions to make, but philosophy will pursue its own avenues depending on the curiosity, the abilities, and above all, the passions of specific philosophers.

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