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John Searle

Freedom and Neurobiology

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John Searle has been around for a long time. His first significant philosophy paper was published in *Mind* in 1958. Since then he has produced over a dozen books and about two hundred articles. And here he is again, nearly fifty years later, with yet another book displaying his familiar no-nonsense approach to the central problems of philosophy.

As Searle disarmingly explains in his introduction, he produced this latest volume by accident. In 2001 he gave two lectures at the Sorbonne and agreed to their publication in French translation, thinking that they would in due course appear in some little-read journal. He was pleasantly surprised when some time later he received copies of an elegant little volume called *Liberté et Neurobiology*. Translations into German, Spanish, Italian and Chinese quickly followed, by which point it seemed silly not to have an English version.

Inadvertent though it may be, this book offers a good introduction to Searle's recent work. One of the lectures is on free will, the other on political power, and together they develop his ideas about mind and society, two topics that have dominated his writing over the past couple of decades. In addition, the lectures are prefaced by a long introductory chapter explaining how these concerns relate to Searle's overall philosophical programme of finding a place for humanity within the world described by basic science. 'How do we fit in?' is Searle's own pithy formulation of his agenda.

Professor Searle is American through and through, but his formative philosophical years were spent in Oxford. He arrived as a Rhodes Scholar in 1952 and stayed for seven years, first as an undergraduate and then as a don at Christ Church. Back then Oxonian 'linguistic philosophy' was the dominant philosophical influence in the English-speaking world. It taught that careful attention to everyday language is the way to solve philosophical problems. Our common language embodies the accumulated wisdom of past generations, J.L. Austin and P.F. Strawson assured their students. Philosophical clarity is best achieved by applying the intricate web of distinctions implicit in everyday discourse.

Searle's earliest published work was squarely in this tradition, focusing on foundational issues in the workings of ordinary language. But at the end of the 1950s he returned to America and joined the Department of Philosophy at Berkeley, where he has remained ever since. Over the years Searle has drifted away from his Oxford roots. Initially he continued his work in the philosophy of language. His first book, Speech Acts, published in 1969, developed Austin's analysis of the different ways in which language can be used. But by the 1980s he had ceased to place language at the centre of the philosophical enterprise, and had come to regard the human mind as the more fundamental realm, with

language merely the medium by which we make thought public. Moreover, there is something decidedly unOxonian about Searle's current programme of explaining how humans fit into the world of basic science. His teachers would have viewed any such ambition as a species of American vulgarity. Oxford philosophy has long been deeply anti-scientific, regarding it as some kind of category mistake to suppose that scientific findings can in any way threaten or illuminate our everyday understanding of people.

Still, there is one respect in which Searle remains loyal to his old tutors. Whenever he is faced with a conflict between common sense and arcane philosophical doctrine, he backs common sense every time. He may no longer appeal to the authority of 'ordinary language', but he remains suspicious of the pretensions of philosophical argument to overturn everyday opinion. This is no principled stance—Searle offers no transcendental defence of everyday thinking—but his philosophical practice is often reminiscent of G.E. Moore's celebrated response to scepticism. I know I have a hand, said Moore, and surely this knowledge is more secure than any tenuous chain of reasoning from questionable philosophical principles. Perhaps a direct lineage through Searle's teacher Austin can be traced. Austin always said that the main influence on his work was Moore's philosophy of common sense. Searle's mature rhetorical style is more mid-West cracker-barrel than the dry wit of his Oxford mentor, but the underlying sentiment remains the same.

It is his homespun plain-thinking that has won Searle an audience beyond the world of professional philosophy. In the late 1970s he made a foray into literary theory, defending the possibility of literal meaning against Jacques Derrida's insistence that all language is indefinitely malleable. The resulting exchange with Derrida generated more acrimony than enlightenment, and it should be said that subsequent linguistic theory has run somewhat against Searle, but the episode did much to establish his reputation as a champion of good sense against abstruse theory. After that came Searle's famous Chinese Room Argument. The target this time was the fashionable view that the human mind is nothing but a digital computer. Searle aimed to show that computers could no more think than he could understand Chinese. The argument was endlessly discussed and won him an invitation to give the 1984 Reith Lectures. More recently, Searle has entered the public fray on consciousness, using a series of essay reviews in the *New York Review of Books* to puncture the controversial views of Daniel Dennett, Francis Crick, Roger Penrose, and others.

It should be said that professional philosophers are not always persuaded by Searle's non-sense approach to philosophical problems. Common sense is all very well, but it has many strands, and they aren't always internally consistent, especially when they need to be squared with the findings of science. This is why philosophers often end up with odd theories. When everyday thinking is incoherent, apparently obvious truths may need to be jettisoned. Sometimes it just isn't enough to hold fast to common thinking. In cases like these Searle's down-home attitude can sometimes look like little more than refusal to address the real questions.

Searle's account of consciousness is a case in point. For most contemporary philosophers of mind, the choice lies between materialism and dualism. Materialists say that the

conscious mind reduces to the physical brain. Our thoughts, feelings and emotions are nothing but neural processes inside our cranium. Dualists take the opposite view, and insist that conscious processes are distinct from brain processes. They may be closely correlated with and even controlled by the brain, but for all that they constitute an additional non-physical element of reality.

Searle gives both these views short shrift. He rejects materialism on the grounds that it denies the felt world of conscious experience. He is aware, of course, that materialists will say that they are not eliminating consciousness, but simply revealing its true nature, but even so he insists it is just obvious that brain states aren't the same as subjective feelings. As for dualism, he complains that it fails to integrate consciousness with the rest of the world and in particular fails to explain how our conscious thinking can exert a causal influence on our physical behaviour.

Searle is quite right to point out that both materialism and dualism fly in the face of familiar assumptions. The question is whether there is any good alternative. Searle says that he has one, but it is difficult to see what it is. A phrase he often repeats is that consciousness is 'caused by and realized in' the brain. But this looks contradictory. When philosophers talk about something being 'realized in' something else, they mean the way it is constituted. For example, your library is 'realized in' your books. But this suggests that causation and realization are incompatible. After all, your library isn't caused by your books—it is your books. So it is hard to see how consciousness simultaneously be 'caused by and realized in' the brain. Surely consciousness can only be caused by the brain if it is distinct from the brain, not realized in it. Searle offers various analogies, such as the relation between the solidity of an object and the arrangement of its constituent molecules. But this seems unhelpful. If the solidity of an object is nothing more than the arrangement of its molecules, as Searle seems to agree, then surely it can't also be something extra that is caused by that arrangement.

As it happens, Searle thinks that the special features of consciousness make the analogy with properties like solidity less than perfect. He contrasts consciousness's 'first-person subjectivity' with the 'third-person objective' nature of the material world, and infers that even though consciousness is 'causally reducible' to the physical world, it is not 'ontologically reducible'. It is hard to know what to make of this. Surely consciousness is either reducible to the brain or it isn't. Searle seems to want to have it both ways. Perhaps the moral is that we can't always hang on to common sense. Materialism and dualism are indeed both counterintuitive, but maybe this is only because common sense is leading us astray somewhere.

Similar worries arise about Searle's treatment of free will in the present volume. Searle takes it to be obvious that free will requires indeterminism. He has no time for the 'compatibilist' view that freedom will be present even in a deterministic world as long as our actions are determined in a benign way (or at least all 'the free will worth wanting' as Daniel Dennett has put it). For Searle genuine freedom is incompatible with determinism, and that's that. Given this, he turns to quantum mechanical indeterminism to make space for free will. His admittedly tentative solution is that the unreduced

conscious mind might play an independent role in directing brain processes that are subject to indeterminacy at the neuronal level.

Well, no doubt this suggestion will play well on the Clapham omnibus, but the trouble is that it is hard to square it with modern physics. Quantum mechanics tells us that the probabilities of physical effects are always fixed by prior physical circumstances. If Searle's suggestion is right, then this principle breaks down inside the human brain, at those points where conscious minds exert an independent influence on events. This implication is not incoherent, but it seems highly unlikely. Serious physicists are unlikely to start looking for violations of quantum mechanics inside the human skull. With free will, as with consciousness, it seems that Searle's affinity for common sense has left him in a philosophically unstable position.

Over the past decade, starting with *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), Searle has been branching out into the field of social ontology. He is interested in the way that social institutions are constituted by little more than the collective attitudes of the population. Money is the classic example—intrinsically valueless pieces of paper count as money for no other reason than that people treat them as such. Searle applies the model generally. In an analysis that harks back to his earlier work on the uses of language, he argues that all social institutions derive from collective agreements of the form 'X shall count as Y'. We collectively ascribe the status of money—or traffic warden, title deed, or Prime Minister—to items with certain properties, and therewith these items acquire certain functions.

In this volume he extends these ideas to an analysis of political power. He argues that political power derives from the duties, obligations, permissions and privileges that come with the collective ascription of 'status functions'. Because of this he holds that all political power 'comes from the bottom up'. Those with political power owe their clout to the collective intentionality of the overall population.

Searle develops these ideas with originality and flair, but it is hard not to wonder whether they are not more suited to his native United States than to more divided societies. Searle is aware that in many societies large sections of the population do not regard the status quo as legitimate, and that existing institutions are often only maintained with the help of economic and military power. But he urges that even in these cases the overall system, including the economic and military structure itself, is founded on the general acceptance of 'status functions' by the population.

However, he offers no principled reason for according collective intentions this primacy over other sources of power, and it leads him to some odd conclusions. Thus he says, about the collapses of the Soviet empire and the Apartheid regime, 'In both cases, as far as I can tell, the key element in the collapse of the system of status functions was the withdrawal of acceptance by large numbers of people involved.' This seems to have things exactly back to front. The key element in both cases was surely not that the subject populations underwent any shifts of attitude, but that the Russian and South African oppressors ceased to think that the game was worth the candle and made it clear

that they would not resist change,. The vast majority in South Africa and the East European satellite states had always disliked the status quo, but had no rational alternative to acquiescence. Indeed it is striking that, far from changing their minds about anything, most of them maintained precisely this attitude of pragmatic acceptance throughout the period of transition: in nearly all the revolutions of the early 1990s, most notably in South Africa, the political changes were achieved in an orderly manner that hinged crucially on the interim recognition of the effective authority of the old regimes.

Searle sometimes suggests that his work on social institutions is breaking new ground by addressing issues that previous thinkers have taken for granted. He may be right about thinkers in the philosophical canon, but social theorists have surely had much to say on the subjects that interest him. Searle mentions Simmel, Durkheim and Weber in passing, but only to tell us that, 'as far as I know', they had nothing to say about the special nature of institutional facts. This is a puzzling claim. Weber in particular had a lot to say about the foundations of political institutions and the nature of political power. Especially pertinent is his elegant and influential definition of the state as a 'community that successfully claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force'. The crucial point here is that the legitimacy need only be successfully claimed, not endorsed, and this is consistent with most citizens regarding the state as quite illegitimate, as in the East European satellites and the old South Africa. Here and elsewhere it is a pity that Searle has not stopped to learn more from thinkers in the sociological tradition. By building his analysis of social reality solely out of materials provided by his native common sense, he has missed out on some hard-won insights.

Still, perhaps Searle's loyalty to everyday thinking is a price worth paying for his undoubted virtues. During the course of his intellectual lifetime, philosophy has become a dry and technical business. Most philosophers today write only for other philosophers about issues that can accurately be termed scholastic. Against this background, Searle is a beacon of accessible expertise, a throwback to a time when philosophy was part of public debate. His work is devoted to some of the most foundational questions in philosophy, yet he never gets bogged down in the kind of esoteric disputation that forgets why the issues matter in the first place. If he does this by sticking closely to the firm ground of common sense, this has not prevented him from producing a constant stream of challenging views across an ever-increasing range of topics. Thankfully there is no sign of his stopping yet.