

Searle and Subjectivity

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In *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, John Searle claims to offer a nondualistic theory in which consciousness can be seen at last as an ordinary biological phenomenon. “Consciousness,” says Searle, “is a higher-level or emergent property of the brain in the utterly harmless sense of ‘higher-level’ or ‘emergent’ in which solidity is a higher-level emergent property of H₂O molecules when they are in a lattice structure (ice), and liquidity is similarly a higher-level emergent property of H₂O molecules when they are, roughly speaking, rolling around on each other (water).”

Searle is well aware that these claims will not be easily accepted and he gives arguments against a goodly number of conflicting views. The present paper is about one of these arguments. This argument seems to me to be one of the most interesting that Searle makes, and if it were successful, it would go a long way toward supporting his claim to be nondualistic. It would, moreover, be usable by other theorists in their efforts to overcome the emptiness of materialism that is consequent upon the explanatory gap. Unfortunately, as we shall see in Part II of this paper, the argument does not work. First, however, we must understand what the argument is and what is required of it. This is the business of Part I.¹

I

To understand Searle’s argument, we must first state the argument against which it is directed. For reasons that will soon be evident, I shall call this target argument “the nonconstructibility argument”.² This argument begins by considering the relation between liquidity and H₂O molecules. It is a feature of this and many other cases that an object’s having a “higher level” property can be explained by the laws of science together with the premise that the object is constructed out of certain kinds of parts standing in certain relations. For example, that water flows out of tipped vessels, leaks through holes, spreads into puddles, and so on, are consequences of physical laws together with the properties that H₂O molecules have at temperatures between 0°C and 100°C and the fact that water is composed of H₂O molecules. We can also state this by saying that,

¹ The nondualistic theory is at Searle, 1992, pp. 85 and 90. The quote by Searle is on p. 14. For the explanatory gap, see Levine, 1983. For the explanation of the emptiness of materialism, see Robinson, 2004.

² The statement of the nonconstructibility argument parallels Searle’s text at pp. 100–101. Searle attributes this argument to Nagel, 1974 and Nagel, 1986, but it is a nontrivial question whether the attribution is justified. In this paper, I make no attempt to resolve this attribution question. The nonconstructibility argument is in any case important, and the focus of the paper is on what Searle says in response to it.

given the laws of physics, it is causally necessary that an object composed of H₂O molecules should exhibit liquidity.

The nonconstructibility argument continues by claiming that in the case of pains and neural events, we can find no analogous necessity. We have no science whose principles, together with descriptions of the properties of some set of neural structures or events, entail that pain is exemplified. We can, of course, observe correlations between occurrences of certain neural events and occurrences of pains; but we have neither a science that explains such correlations, nor any idea of what such a science might look like.

To summarize, the premises of the nonconstructibility argument are:

- (1) We can understand why it is causally necessary that, e.g., what is composed of H₂O molecules and falls in a certain temperature range should exhibit liquidity.
- (2) We cannot understand why any causal necessity should hold between constructions out of neurons or neural events, on the one hand, and occurrences of pain, on the other.

There are several conclusions that one might seek to draw from these premises. The one I shall take as central for the purposes of this paper is the following:

- (3) We have no reason to believe that pain stands to neural events as liquidity stands to H₂O molecules at certain temperatures.

This conclusion evidently stops short of entailing the falsehood of Searle's claim, which we may state as follows:

- (4) Pain stands to neural structures or events as liquidity stands to H₂O molecules at certain temperatures.

Nonetheless, (3) is a threat to Searle's view. This is because he asserts the truth of (4), not merely its possibility. Moreover, Searle needs to assert (4) in order to make his view plausible. Without (4), Searle's materialism would be subject to one of the familiar objections to dualism, namely, lack of an account of how pains are supposed to be related to the (rest of) the material world.³ But according to (3), we have no reason to believe that (4) is true. Thus, Searle appears to be asserting a view that (3) tells us we have no reason to believe.

Searle responds to this argument in several ways. One of these seems to me to be particularly interesting, and it is this one to which I shall limit my discussion.⁴ The key passage is the following:

³ Searle is proposing that we abandon a set of distinctions that he thinks preserves an incorrect set of assumptions. The price of his giving up (4) would be the implausible claim that we would improve our conceptual position by affirming that pains are material without having anything whatever to say about how they are related to any other material thing.

⁴ The other replies strike me as not only less interesting, but unsuccessful. The reasons, very briefly, are the following: (1) Contrary to Searle's claim, the inverse square law is not an account of gravity. If the mind-body relation is really like the relation of attraction between bodies,

[What the nonconstructibility argument shows] is only that in the case of the relations between material and material phenomena, we can subjectively picture both sides of the relation; but in the case of the relations between material and mental phenomena, one side of the relation is already subjective, and hence we cannot picture its relation to the material in the way that we can picture the relations between liquidity and molecule movement, for example. [The nonconstructibility] argument, in short, only shows that we cannot get out of the subjectivity of our consciousness to see its necessary relation to its material basis. We form a picture of necessity based on our subjectivity, but we cannot in that way form a picture of the necessity of the relation between subjectivity and neurophysiological phenomena, because we are already in the subjectivity, and the picturing relation would require that we get outside it.⁵

I shall soon attempt to clarify and expand the argument in this passage. Before doing so, however, let us notice that Searle does not attack the premises or even the conclusion of the nonconstructibility argument. Searle's strategy is rather to explain why (2) is true, in such a way that its truth will not seem to matter. He holds that our inability to see any causal necessity in the relation between neural events and exemplification of pain is just what we should expect, given the (ontologically) subjective character of pain. If (2) is just what we should expect, given the rest of Searle's views, then it cannot be the basis of any real objection to his theory.

This is an ingenious move if it can be defended, but we clearly need further explanation of the alleged difficulty in "picturing" the mental-material relation. We find this further explanation in the pages leading up to the discussion of the nonconstructibility argument.⁶ Let us therefore look at this immediately preceding section. We can begin with the explanation Searle gives when he raises the question of why it seems difficult or counterintuitive to imagine the world that he says we know to exist—namely, one in which there are subjective states and also nothing but particles that are organized into systems of various kinds and degrees of complexity.⁷ Searle holds the following.

When we are asked to form a world *view* or a world *picture*, we form these on the model of vision. We tend literally to form an image of reality as

we will simply have to add the mind-body relation to the four recognized physical forces and a conclusion more "dualistic" than (3) (in the text) will have been conceded. (2) Searle's key statement that "Given a full understanding of the brain, it seems to me likely that we would think it obvious that if the brain was in a certain sort of state, it had to be conscious" is a question begging assertion that what we cannot now even imagine is likely to be the case. (3) The fact that we think a man with his foot caught in a punch press must be in terrible pain is not to the point here. The nonconstructibility argument denies that we can explain how a pain could be constructed out of particles or neural events. It bases nothing on certainty or lack thereof; it does not even mention certainty. Insisting on the certainty of the injury-pain connection does nothing to provide an explanation of constructibility.

⁵ Searle, 1992, pp. 102–103.

⁶ Searle, pp. 94–100.

⁷ The explanation appears on Searle, p. 96.

consisting of very small bits of matter, “the particles,” and then we imagine these organized into systems, again with gross visible features. But when we visualize the world with this inner eye, we can’t see consciousness. Indeed, it is the very subjectivity of consciousness that makes it invisible in the crucial way.⁸

The reason for this last remark seems to be that “If we try to draw our own consciousness, we just end up drawing whatever it is that we are conscious of”.⁹ We cannot make consciousness an object of observation, because “where conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed . . .”.¹⁰

We find it difficult to come to terms with subjectivity, not just because we have been brought up in an ideology that says that ultimately reality must be completely objective, but because our idea of an objectively observable reality presupposes the notion of observation that is itself ineliminably subjective, and that cannot itself be made the object of observation in a way that objectively existing objects and states of affairs in the world can.¹¹

These remarks are very suggestive, but they are not in a form that makes the argument very explicit. Let us try, therefore, to arrive at a somewhat clearer formulation of Searle’s argument. We can express one of Searle’s leading ideas by saying that in order to understand the necessity of a relation between Xs and Ys, we must be able to picture Xs in the same way that we can picture Ys.¹² To vary Searle’s picturing metaphor, we can say that in order to understand the necessity of a relation between Xs and Ys, we need to get them on the same stage, so that we can compare them. What I believe this all comes to, without metaphors, is the following:

- (5) If we are to understand the necessity of a relation between Xs and Ys, we must get Xs and Ys into the same relation to ourselves.

The burden of Searle’s argument is then to show that, where Xs and Ys are mental and material things, respectively, we cannot get them into the same relation to ourselves. This is argued in two steps. First, Searle says:

- (6) The whole idea of there being an observation of reality is precisely the idea of (ontologically) subjective representations of reality.¹³

If we add that observations require some subject to make them, we can put Searle’s claim in this way:

⁸ Searle, p. 96, italics in original.

⁹ Searle, p. 96.

¹⁰ Searle, p. 97.

¹¹ Searle, pp. 97–98.

¹² Compare Searle, p. 102.

¹³ Searle, p. 99. Ontologically subjective states must be *someone’s* states; they are related to one person in a way that they are not related to any other person (see Searle, pp. 94–95). The contrast is with epistemically subjective states, which are states that depend on the stance, attitude, or opinion of an observer. All references to subjectivity in this paper are to ontological subjectivity in Searle’s sense.

Subject S's observing of object O requires both:

- (i) S has an ontologically subjective representation, R.
- (ii) R represents O.

Searle also premises:

- (7) [W]here conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed¹⁴

I take this to mean that, in the case of conscious subjectivity, we cannot draw a distinction between the representation and the represented object. That is, we cannot have a subjective representation R' that represents R, if R is an (ontologically) subjective representation. If this is so, however, then there cannot be a case of both:

- (iii) S has an ontologically subjective representation, R'.
- (iv) R' represents R.

This, however, implies the following:

- (8) Where R is an (ontologically) subjective representation, it cannot stand in the same relation to S that O can, where O is any (ontologically) objective thing.

That is, a representation cannot stand as the first term in the relation: ___ is represented to S by the representation ___ . This, together with (5), is taken to imply that S cannot understand the necessity of any relation between an ontologically subjective R and an ontologically objective O. That is, we have the following conclusion:

- (9) S cannot understand the necessity of any relation between a mental thing and a material thing.

Let us bear in mind that this conclusion, taken by itself, is quite congenial to the proponent of the nonconstructibility argument. The significance of the argument (5) through (9) is not its conclusion, but the fact that the route to its conclusion is compatible with the necessity of the relation whose understandability (9) denies.

II

This argument is ingenious and seductive, but I shall now try to show that it is unsound. What the argument actually supports is the (intermediate) conclusion that our relation to our subjective representations is not observation. But in order for (5) to lead us to (9), it is not enough to show that there is some relation in which S cannot stand both to material things and mental things. One must, instead, show that there is no relation that satisfies this condition and that is relevant to understanding. Now, Searle's argument does not support this stronger claim; therefore, it does not validly lead to the main conclusion, (9).

¹⁴ Searle, p. 97.

We can, of course, provide formal validity for Searle's argument by adding what he seems tacitly to have assumed, namely, the following:

- (10) There is no other relation besides observation that is relevant to understanding and that we can stand in to both material and mental things.

However, I believe it will be readily conceded that (10) is not evident. Perhaps it will not be so easy to secure agreement that (10) is actually false; but that is what I shall now try to show.

When we judge that we do not understand the necessity of any relation between pains and neural events, we are not in a state of reticence that is due to ignorance of the terms that we are comparing. On the contrary, we know what pains are, and we know quite a lot about what neural events are; the problem is only that we do not know how to tell even a fanciful story that shows us *how* the former might be causally necessitated by the latter. Now, part of the description of this predicament is that we know what pains are and that we know what neural events are. This gives us *knowing* as the relation that violates the claim in (10), and thus shows that this assumption is false.

This attack on (10) could be parried if it could be shown that knowledge is not relevant to the issues at hand. I do not think that this will strike anyone as a very promising line of defense. Nonetheless, there is a way in which it might be developed that we must consider. Namely, it might be held that it really is observation in which we would have to stand to two kinds of objects, if we are to understand how some state of one can causally necessitate the other. If this were true, then knowledge, by itself, would not be relevant to the understanding with which we are concerned, and (10) would stand.

This suggestion, however, will not work. To see why, notice that neural events, although *known* to us, are not *observed* by us. For that matter, H₂O molecules are also not objects that we can observe. We may, it is true, use visual models to assist us in understanding the relation between the molecular construction of water and its liquidity. But the knowledge upon which our understanding in this case fundamentally depends is the knowledge of nonvisual propositions such as that a thing composed of parts that have little tendency to resist each other's passage over one another will be likely to flow if it is not constrained.

These remarks show that it cannot be required that we observe both of the terms that we know to stand in a relation of causal necessitation. This, of course, provides another objection to Searle's argument, because it undercuts (5). However, it might be thought that an important part of his argument could be rescued if we could show that any *effect* that we can understand to be causally necessitated must be observed by us. This suggestion is doomed, however, by the fact that we can understand causal necessitation of unobservable microevents by unobservable microevents, as when we explain the behavior of protons by reference to quarks.

Finally, it might be objected that Searle's argument can be applied to

knowing. That is, it may be held that we cannot know pains and neural events *in the same sense*, because we know pains directly, but neural events only indirectly, that is, through representations.

This reply, however, will not serve Searle's needs. To see this, we must first identify a possible confusion. One may move from "doesn't know in the same sense" to "doesn't really know". If one makes this slide in our case, one will arrive at either the view that we do not really know what pains are, or that we do not really know what neural events are. Both of these claims are implausible, to say the least. Moreover, Searle does not argue for either claim. I shall therefore take it that we cannot be doing Searle any favor by treating the difference between direct and indirect knowing as if it were a difference between knowing and not knowing.

Once we are clear about this point, it should also be clear that it would be objectionably *ad hoc* to demand the following.

- (11) We have to know two things either both directly or both indirectly in order to understand how one can causally necessitate the other.

The main difficulty with (11) is not merely that it is a stronger requirement than the one in (5), and not merely that no argument has been given for requiring this additional strength. The main difficulty is rather that (11) is too closely related to (2). That is, (11) is a general claim and (2) describes a particular case under that claim. This is a difficulty because Searle's strategy was to *explain* why the failure to see any causal necessity between neural events and exemplification of pain is just what we should expect given his other views. This explanation was needed in order to allow us to accept Searle's analogy between liquidity and H₂O molecules, and pain and neural events, despite the truth of (2). If, however, we must invoke (11) to explain why (2) is true, this strategy will not succeed. Instead, we will just be left to wonder why (11) should be true, because it is not at all evident why *knowing* two kinds of thing should not be enough to enable us to understand how one of them might causally necessitate the other.

To conclude: Searle has made a very interesting attempt to explain why the nonconstructibility argument is not a genuine obstacle to accepting his vision, in which a nondualistic outlook is supported in part by reliance on an analogy of liquidity with pain. I have argued, however, that this attempt does not succeed. Searle has not been able to explain what he needed to explain, namely, why the causal necessity holding between pains and neural events should remain opaque to us, even if pain is like liquidity. Thus, his affirmation that this analogy does hold remains problematic.

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