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Free Will and the Analytical Mind

A review of "Mind. A brief introduction," by John R. Searle Oxford, 2004

At a dialogue between neuroscientists, psychologists and philosophers in May 2006, I had the pleasure of meeting John Searle; John is a very engaging and intelligent character. He has spent 50 years in so-called 'philosophy of mind', his chosen area of specialism, and speaks with great clarity and confidence on his topic. John thought that the view of 'extended mind', espoused by half of us, was 'crazy', and to that other half, the idea of John and others that consciousness was something entirely caused by neurons and located exclusively between the ears, was 'crazy'.

Reading his recent book brought home to me what a gulf there is between the 'analytical philosophy' which occupies the time of most philosophy departments in the English-speaking world, and the kind of philosophy which I see as relevant to problems facing us today. This stuff reminds me of the kind of things we argued about in high school, about whether trees which fall over in the desert make a sound, and whether altruists can't be altruists because they *like* helping others, and so on. It is somewhat akin to mathematics, calling on a certain kind of precision and clarity of thought, but nevertheless utterly fatuous and breathtakingly remote from reality.

It would be just as inappropriate to "critique" this material as it would be to criticise a monograph on mathematics on any basis other than novelty and internal consistency (presuming it interests you at all), but I will just pick out two sections – on Free Will and on the Self – which bear on the issue of the Subject, which is a concern of mine, and explore Searle's position on these questions. I should mention at the outset though that in the case of Free Will, Searle admits that he regards his own response as unsatisfactory, though for most of the questions touched on in this book, he seems to regard himself as having said more or less the last word on the topic.

Free Will

I haven't troubled myself about the 'problem of free will' for many years now. The place of this problem in my concerns has been taken instead by the problem of *subject* and *structure*: that is, whether it is possible for a subject (an individual person or a group of people acting in concert) to *make a difference*, or is the way history unfolds and the kind of views people hold and so on, determined by laws of history, social structures and the location of the individual within those structures. This is not the problem of determinism versus voluntarism as such; no-one I know would deny for a moment that they could raise their arm, without thinking that they had been *destined* to do so ever since the Big Bang. No sane human being takes Laplacian determinism seriously, though the puzzle of refuting it by logical argument is something which has entertained academic departments of philosophy down the centuries, and will doubtless continue to do so in the future.

For me, it *matters* whether I can make a difference in society, and when I look

back on my life and see how at certain times in my life I was carried along by the spirit of the times, or made mistakes typical of my social position at the time, I struggle to dig deeper, and learn, and do better in future. The problem of freedom for me is therefore about the individual and our relation to social forces and culture, and about our ability to rise above the cultural and historical forces acting upon us.

Not so for John Searle. These issues which have troubled my mind for countless hours do not even rate a mention for John. Only in the closing page of the whole book, does Searle mention the issue of cultural determinism:

“The level at which we attempt to account for mental phenomena is biological rather than, say, at the level of subatomic physics. The reason for this is that *consciousness and other mental phenomena are biological phenomena*; they are created by biological processes and are specific to certain sorts of biological organisms. Of course, this is not to deny that our individual minds are shaped by our culture. But culture is not something in opposition to biology; rather, *culture is the form that biology takes* in different communities. One culture may differ from another culture, but there are limits to the differences. Each must be an expression of the underlying biological commonality of the human species. There could not be a long-term conflict between nature and culture, for if there were, nature would always win; culture would always lose.” (Searle 2004: 207, my emphasis)

Searle poses the problem of free will as follows.

“Every event that occurs in the world has antecedently sufficient causes,” (p. 151) but we have an intuitively compelling experience of human freedom; this freedom is experienced in the *gap* between the conditions which had given us reasons on which to act, and the actual execution of a decision made on those reasons. And we know that it is precisely the ability to make such decisions rationally, and to act on reasons, rather than acting either randomly or in a way which is pre-determined, which makes our species so successful.

The problem of *psychological* freedom is posed thus: “Are our psychological states, in the forms of our beliefs and desires, hopes and fears, as well as our awareness of our obligations and commitments, etc., causally sufficient to determine all of our decisions and actions?” (p. 156) A drug addict and the subject of a posthypnotic suggestion are taken as exceptions that prove the rule. In general, if I do something, it is genuinely because I *decided* to do it, and Searle concludes that psychological freedom is not an illusion, but seems to be real.

The problem is that Searle has specified consciousness as “a system-level, biological feature in much the same way that digestion, or growth, ... a feature of the brain and thus a part of the *physical* world,” (p. 80) and of course, in the physical world everything has its sufficient cause and there is no free will. Neurons cannot make decisions about whether to do this or that; they all act in accordance with physical laws.

But according to Searle, every state of the consciousness corresponds to some

physical state of the brain. Even if the *way in which* consciousness is correlated with neuronal activity is unknown, according to Searle, a change of mind (as in making a decision on something) implies that a *corresponding change* occurring in the neuronal activity in the brain: neurons *cause* consciousness.

He considers two hypotheses about how the brain works: either it is a mechanistic “in the old-fashioned sense (like any other organ)” or it operates like a quantum process with outcomes which manifest indeterminacy. Searle notes that the latter hypothesis allows that the behaviour of the brain is not *random*:

“If we suppose that the creation of consciousness by the brain is a result of processes that are, at some level, quantum phenomena, and we suppose that the process of conscious deliberation inherits the absence of causal sufficiency of the quantum level, it does not thereby follow that it inherits *randomness*. ... the effect of conscious rationality is precisely such as to avoid random decision-making. In a word, the randomness of the microprocesses that cause the conscious phenomena at the macrolevel does not imply that the conscious phenomena are random. To suppose otherwise is to commit the fallacy of composition.” (p. 162)

The system-level states of the brain are therefore not random, but may be *indeterminate*:

“the only established nondeterministic element in nature is the quantum level, and if we are to suppose that consciousness is *nondeterministic*, that the gap is not only psychologically real but neurologically real, then, given the present state of physics and neurobiology, we have to suppose that there is a quantum mechanical component in the explanation of consciousness. I see no way to avoid this conclusion.” (p. 162)

Summing up:

“It seems to me a massive case of human ignorance. We really do not know how free will exists in the brain, if it exists at all. We do not know why or how evolution has given us the unshakeable conviction of free will. We do not, in short, know how it could possibly work. But we also know that the conviction of our own freedom is inescapable. We cannot act except under the presupposition of freedom.” (p. 164)

There is a genuine logical puzzle here. To recapitulate: we have freedom to think this or think that, and to act on those thoughts, generating physical effects in the world. But the thought itself is some physical process, and the course of that physical process is governed by the laws of physics, not free will. We can decide to raise our arm, and thereby make our consciousness a cause in the physical world, but we cannot decide to move the neurons in our brain around in this or that way to bring about a certain kind of consciousness. *How* the particles in our brain move (according to Searle) is *what* we are thinking. He sees consciousness and the corresponding neuronal activity as two different levels of description of *one and the same thing*: so how can the brain exhibit freedom on one level of

description, and be subject to the laws of physics on another?

Only if the physical laws operating inside our heads are *indeterminate*, as a result of quantum physics, says Searle, is there an opening into which free will can insert itself. Free will can become a physical cause via the determination of quantum events, so that we can make rational decisions and act on them. This only sets up a circular logic of course, since the will to determine a quantum event is still the outcome of a brain process.

Remember that Searle is not concerned about whether the individual can make a difference in the world or some such thing; he is just trying to understand how when he decides to raise his arm, that is really a result of his free will rather than the outcome of material interactions within his brain, including the *illusion* of free will.

But let us make a slight revision to Searle's assumptions. Let us assume that thinking is *not* something going on exclusively between the ears, but on the contrary, that other parts of our body and things and people outside of us participate, in however small a way does not matter, in consciousness. Let us assume that the brain is not a *closed* system. Let us suppose for example that the presence of something in my field of vision (for example my address book), participates in my consciousness (for example, remembering my friend's phone number). That is, that the change from one state of consciousness to another depends in some measure on something which is not between my ears, and is therefore not subject solely to the biology of the brain.

If then, my own actions manifest human freedom (which is just what is to be proved), *then* the things I have in my field of vision at any given time, not to mention my economic situation, the friends and family I have, the books and computers I have at my disposal, my state of health, etc., etc., are *manifestations of my own free activity*. If we allow that these things, manifestations in part of my own free activity, participate in determining my thinking at any given moment, then nothing more is necessary to establish that my consciousness is in part the result of my own freedom, and is not determined by physics alone. The physical environment in which I live, inclusive of the internal constitution of my body, is the manifestation of both lawful physical activity and wilful human activity, including my own previous interactions with other people and things. If my consciousness is constituted, even in part, by states of this extended system, then my consciousness is *not* subject solely to the laws of physics – wholly but not solely.

This pushes the logician's puzzle back one degree. *If* I ever had free will, *then* that free will is embedded in the environment in which I now live. There would still have to have been (for the logician) an *original* act of free will. So our logician still has a problem: in order for me to manifest free will in the use of something outside the brain in the determination of my consciousness, then I must have acted as a free person at some time in the past. This leads to an infinite regression: in order to be free I must already be free.

This is the same problem to which Johann Fichte addressed himself in 1799. His solution was this: it is necessary for some other person to recognise me as a free person, to call upon me to exercise my freedom. Free will therefore does not

derive from the *internal constitution* of the human organism, but rather from the demands of *other people*. Free will is not an innate property of the human body, but a *social product* – the creation of social formations in which people were required to act as free agents.

Does this resolve the problem of John, sitting alone at his writing desk, and just deciding to lift his arm? In this scenario he receives no impulse or demand from outside, it is entirely about a process going on inside his head plus his capacity to control his own body. Growing up as human beings, learning to exercise our freedom, we learn to manipulate our own minds in just the same way that we can manipulate objects. We learn to do this by *internalising* the use of objects, particularly *artefacts*. For example, by pointing to the letters on a page and listening to someone read them out, by copying the sounds they make, then reading aloud by ourselves, we may learn to read silently, and even memorise whole epic poems and study the conundrums of analytical philosophers.

So we actually *can* intentionally “operate” our own brains, much as we can operate a car, while the remains all the while subject to the laws of physics. There is no border line with physical/law-governed on this side and free/voluntary on that side. Our growing up as human beings within a culture means that we are taught, and we learn to control the inner psychological and biological processes of our own bodies. Our bodies are a realm in which the determinate/physical is mixed in with the indeterminate and free.

The point (for me) is that we gain this freedom to control our own bodies only mediately via other people and the products of the culture around us. The question is: are we exercising genuinely free self-determination, or are we simply acting in a way that is determined by the means that the culture places at our disposal.

And that is a question which is not so easily answered. Perhaps Nature will trump Culture in the end, but it is not a trivial question.

The Self

Next I want to just briefly mention Searle’s treatment of the problem of the Self.

He gives a succinct, minimal specification of a self:

“It has to be an entity, such that one and the same entity has consciousness, perceptions, rationality, the capacity to engage in action, and the capacity to organise perceptions and reasons, so as to perform voluntary actions on the presupposition of freedom. If you have got all of that, you have a self.

“Now we can account for a whole lot of other features, of which two in particular are central for our notion of the human self. One is *responsibility*. When I engage in actions I undertake responsibility and thus such questions as desert, blame, reward, justice, praise and condemnation make a kind of sense that they would not make otherwise. Second, we are now able to account for the peculiar relations that rational animals have toward time, I can plan for the future, because one and the same self that makes the plans will exist in the future to execute those plans.” (p. 204)

I think this is a pretty good specification. In my own work, I have defined the subject as a self-conscious system of activity, minimally specified as having “cogito” (which I count as the capacity for perception and rationality loosely defined), agency (which I count as the capacity to engage in action on the presupposition of freedom, and therefore bear moral responsibility) and self-consciousness (which I count as memory and the capacity to recognise oneself in one’s actions over a period of time).

So I find myself in agreement with John Searle on the minimal specification of the self, or in my terms, the subject. Of course, in common with the entire tradition of Western philosophy since Descartes, Searle identifies this self or subject with an individual human organism. But his definition, interpreted dialectically, is capable of encompassing social subjects. By confining his conception of the subject or self to the human individual, he will never be able to resolve the conundrums he has set himself. Every aspect of identity and agency expresses the participation of an individual with a social subject or project. It is such participation which also leads to the manifestation of Free Will.