

John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT, a Bradford Book, 1992.

1. *Introduction.*

In this remarkable work, the author launches a brilliant attack on the traditional orthodoxies in the philosophy of mind. He wants to criticize and overcome the dominant traditions in the study of the mental, both "materialist" and "dualist". And with the same blow he tries to put the final nail in the coffin of a theory which pretends the mind is a computer program.

Noteworthy is his message about the philosophy of language, which he classifies as a branch of the philosophy of mind. Therefore, he pretends, no theory of language is complete without an account of the relations between mind and language. Moreover, he says, we cannot ignore how meaning, as subtle part of language, is grounded in the biological intentionality of the mind/brain. Some expressions are conscious, some of them are not. Sometimes we are making statements about the reality of the world, which can be considered as objective observations, sometimes we are speaking about the outcomes of mental processes, utterances which are necessarily subjectively grounded. For that matter, one of the major themes that runs throughout his book is the attempt to get clear about which of the predicates in the philosophy of mind appoint features that are intrinsic and which are observer relative. For Searle this distinction is very important, for it basically embodies the difference between objectivity and subjectivity.

Consciousness and intentionality are personal, intrinsic and ineliminable. However more than anything else, Searle argues, is the ignorance of the subjectivity of consciousness, which means a gap emerging in contemporaneous thinking and which is to be blamed for so much barrenness and sterility in philosophy and psychology. Further, Searle maintains, the famous mind-body problem has a simple solution: mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiological processes in the brain and are themselves features of the brain. According to our customary jargon, he seems to defend a certain kind of Mentalism. But if he will not be upset when we deliver him the earmark of Mentalist, he obviously disavows a straight mentalism as a false trail. And to distinguish his view from the many

others in the discipline, he calls his postulate “biological naturalism”. And this is not just another name, just another “ism”, for he believes that both materialists and dualists are profoundly mistaken; we are in need of a new approach.

Both the dualist and the materialist, he maintains, accept a certain vocabulary and with it a set of assumptions. But the whole of it is clearly misleading, and the most striking feature of analytic philosophy — the theory of consciousness — seems evidently false. He believes there is no area of contemporary philosophy where so much is said that is so implausible.

The last fifty years of philosophy of the mental seem to link a string of fallacies and illusions. Searle tries to show those misunderstandings. Especially monism/materialism is at stake here, for as nowadays nobody can hold the righteousness of the undiluted dualism, most of the philosophical work bears a materialistic component. Hence Searle holds particularly materialism on the carpet, primarily, as he maintains, because the adherents are unjustifiedly thinking they represent the only scientifically acceptable alternative to anti-scientism that went with traditional dualism: the belief in immortality of the soul, spiritualism and so on.

Another odd fact, closely related to the first is that most authors are deeply committed to the traditional vocabulary and categories. They really think there is some more or less clear meaning attached to the archaic terms of dualism, materialism, physicalism, etc., It seem to them that the issues have to be posed and resolved in these clichés. But Searle shows there are other and more realistic options to consider than the concepts covered by the old-fashioned jargon and with it the assumption of the dilemma of straight dualism/monism. In the opinion of Searle, the features of the mental do not demonstrate any of those traditional and endlessly disputed would-be doctrines: thus they are clearly false.

As many of his contemporaneous colleagues in the field, Searle gives a wide berth to dualism which he considers out of date. No long argumentation is required to dismiss it easily as an unpalatable approach. Therefore, as already said, he launches his attacks only on the materialistic views. Hence in his book he analyses to a great depth most of these theories which he proves, beyond doubt, to be fallacies. So he discards the idea that one day computers might have thoughts, feelings and understanding, and he turns down the assertion that there is nothing mental about the so called “mental states”, a point of view carrying behaviouris-

tic/functionalistic features. Mental states do not consist in the causal relations to the inputs and the outputs of the system, he maintains. If this was the case a system made of beer cans, if it had the right causal relations, would appear to have the same beliefs, desires and intentions as a human being.

Here in the debate Searle wants to try out an approach different from a direct refutation of functionalism. He wants to undermine its foundations, and we did wonder if he would succeed. And for the time being we can only smile when he sneers: "If you are tempted to functionalism, I believe you do not need refutation, you need help".

In his fight against materialism he is intensively challenging the view that consciousness doesn't exist as a private and subjective phenomenon. The view that it must be an observable third-person phenomenon is in his opinion unacceptable. We are talking here about a conviction most famously held by Quine, who maintained: "There just isn't any fact of the matter about whether when you or I say "Rabbit" we mean rabbit, undetached parts of a rabbit, or stage in the life history of a rabbit". Here Quine is holding the wrong end of the stick, Searle pretends, for if you or I are uttering "rabbit" we have a particular idea in mind, a meaning which is maybe private and subjective, but, for sure, undeniable and precise. The fallacy of Quine is the illusion of the third-person observer. He is analysing an expression from beyond the sphere where intention takes its rise, where meaning and cognition appropriate their shape. That means he is ignoring the first-person sphere, which is real but neither observable nor analysable by a third-person method.

On the whole a lot of shortcomings indeed, and Searle is inquiring about the reasons that might have caused these endless confusions. He suggests that during the last fifty years the authors of the study of the mind didn't attach much importance, if any, to consciousness. The essence of the mental seemed to be the objective intelligent behaviour (language, cognition) and its causal relations. Consciousness appeared not to be objective and thus the study of the totality of one's feelings, beliefs and desires could not be scientific. Implicitly they held that every fact in the universe must be in principle knowable. Therefore observing reality was the only scientific method. For that reason to study the mind we had to adopt the objective third-person point of view, ignoring individual and subjective behaviour. That means we had to concentrate our research on observable appearances — the physical — which constituted, so it came

forth, the only reality.

In contemporary philosophy of mind, most often the historical tradition is blinding us, particularly by its method and vocabulary that make false hypotheses seem acceptable. Above all, we are terrified of falling into Cartesian dualism, and therefore we are obliged to accept something non-physical. Besides, it must be stressed, the vocabulary used is not innocent, as it includes a series of apparent oppositions that are almost certainly false, e.g., mental versus physical, body versus mind, materialism versus mentalism, matter versus spirit. Thus we are supposed to believe that if something is mental it cannot be physical. But that is clearly false, the mental *is* physical, we are aware of the truth of it every moment, so Searle pretends, and he paraphrases Descartes when he says: "I am thinking therefore I am physical".

2. *Undermining the foundations.*

To begin this process, Searle asserts : Not all of reality is objective, some of it is undoubtedly subjective. But there is a persistent confusion between (a) the claim that we should try as much as possible to eliminate personal subjective prejudices from the search for truth and (b) the claim that the real world contains no elements that are irreducibly subjective. That's why the tradition seems to study the mind as if it is a structure of neutral phenomena, independent of consciousness. But if you try to treat beliefs, for example, as phenomena that have no essential connection with consciousness, then you are likely to wind up with the idea that they can be defined in terms of behaviourism or functionalism, two outdated ways of thinking.

Indeed, supposing that the ontology of the mental, or a part of it, is objective, is clearly an error. And, it is a mistake too, to suppose that the methodology of a science of mind must concern itself solely with objectively observable behaviour. Mental phenomena are essentially connected with consciousness, and consciousness is essentially a first-person ontology: Mental states are always somebody's mental states. However a subjective ontology of the mind seems intolerable. It seems odd that we can never know someone's inner mental phenomena, and we can hardly accept that each person may have different experiences. That is the reason why, when we analyse a mental phenomenon, we first refine its ontology

in terms of a third-person epistemic, and we reconstruct the ontology so that eventually our logic can have an adequate grip on it. Here we are falling back on behaviourism, functionalism, say positivism with its linguistic reduction to the true/false schema.

A whole lot of confusions arises basically in the wake of the Cartesian concept of the physical. But the concept of physical reality as *res extensa* is simply not adequate to describe the facts that correspond to statements about the physical reality. When we think of the physical, we presume things like molecules, atoms and subatomic particles. We think they are physical in a sense opposed to mental; we argue that these two categories exhaust everything that exist. But the poverty of these categories becomes apparent as soon as you think of the facts that correspond to various sorts of empirical statements. So if you think about balance-of-payments, ungrammatical sentences, war and peace, you are less inclined to think that the physical is a phenomenon of atomic or subatomic structures, that everything must be categorized in a schema of either mental or physical. Indeed, for here, as we can see, there are at least three things wrong. First, the terminology is designed around an already mentioned false opposition, between the physical and the mental. Second, if we think "the physical" in terms of Cartesian terms as *res extensa*, then it is clearly obsolete to suppose that reality exists only on this definition. Third, it is a deep mistake to suppose that the crucial questions for ontology are: "What sort of things exist in the world?" and "What must be the case in the world in order that our empirical statements become true?" It is even a mistake to ask these questions for no answers are available.

Once you see the incoherence of the Cartesian dualism, you can also see that monism and materialism are just as mistaken as dualism. An adept of the latter asks: "How many things and properties are there?" and counts up to two. The monist, on the other hand, got as far as one. But the real mistake is to count at all; dualism versus monism is an erroneous choice.

There is something immensely depressing about this whole history because it all seems so pointless and unnecessary, says Searle. It is all based on the false assumption that the view of reality as entirely physical is inconsistent with the view that the world really contains subjective conscious states such as thoughts and feelings, and other abstract concepts. However the view of the world as completely objective, has a very

powerful hold on us. But it is inconsistent with the most obvious facts of our experience.

3. Consciousness and its place in nature.

Consciousness is often confused with conscience, self-conscience and cognition. But it is neither one of these three, so Searle begins the chapter with this paragraph's title. In his opinion it seems to be a kind of awareness of the body placed in his environment, and, although there are degrees in the level of consciousness, it is an on-off-switch. A system is either conscious or it is not. However, the degree of consciousness can be artificially influenced, and some people introduce chemical substances into their brain for the purpose of producing altered states of consciousness.

And the author emphasizes: conscious states have content. One can never be just conscious, we are conscious of something, it can be a belief, a desire, or an intention. But consciousness is not always intentional. We are aware of pain, but those feelings are not intentional. The reason for emphasizing consciousness in an account of the mind, is that it is the central mental notion. For consciousness acts as a cluster for the whole psychical organisation, and in one way or another, all mental notions, such as intentionality, subjectivity, mental causations, intelligence, language, can only be fully understood as mental by how they relate to consciousness.

But what is consciousness? Searle gives the following answer. It is an ordinary biological feature which is remarkably present in the world, and, although we are facing it during our whole life, it refuses for the time being to fit in all possible definitions. It is neither a material object in the literal sense of the word, nor a metaphysical entity. It is a mental reality, but we find it almost inconceivable that it should be so. But we cannot ignore it, we are aware of it every moment, although it is not observable; it can be seen as the highest level of adaptation of life in the struggle for survival.

The products of the evolutionary process, the organisms, are made of subsystems called cells. Some of these organisms develop particular subsystems, the nerve cells, which we think of as "the nervous system". Some extremely complex nervous systems are capable of causing and

sustaining dispositions and operations. They are the clusters responsible for the conscious states and processes. We find the highest level of consciousness in the human being, who is continuous with the rest of nature. And once you agree with that, Searle says, you have to admit that consciousness as well as other mental capacities are biological phenomena.

Consciousness is, in the opinion of Searle, a biological feature of human and certain animal brains. It is caused by neurobiological processes and as much a part of the natural biological order as any other biological feature, such as mitosis, photosynthesis and digestion. Once you agree with our world view, pretends Searle, consciousness falls into place naturally as an evolved phenotype. The only obstacle to granting consciousness its status as a biological feature of organisms, is the outmoded dualist/materialist assumption that the mental character of consciousness makes it impossible for it to be a physical property.

4. *Subjectivity.*

Conscious mental states and processes have a special feature not possessed by other natural phenomena, namely subjectivity. The sort of subjectivity Searle is speaking about, points to an ontological category, rather than to an epistemic mode. Something can be estimated as good or bad, dependent on the view of the person evaluating. But Searle does not use "subjectivity" in this sense. Ontological subjectivity can be made clear by the example of the statement: "I have pain in my lower back". The statement is completely objective in the sense that it is not dependent on any opinion of the observer; it is epistemically objective. However the pain, the phenomenon itself, has a subjective mode of existence, and it is in that specific sense Searle is pretending that consciousness is subjective.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the disastrous effects that the failure to come to terms with the subjectivity of consciousness has had on the philosophical and psychological work of the past century, says Searle. In ways that are not at all obvious on the surface, the bankruptcy of most work in the philosophy of mind and a great deal of the sterility of academic psychology over the past fifty years, have come from a persistent failure to recognize and to come to terms with the fact that the ontology of the mental is an irreducible first-person ontology.

There are deep reasons, many of them embedded in our unconscious history, why we find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the idea that the real world contains an uneliminably subjective element. But unless we are blinded by bad philosophy, or some form of academic psychology, we really don't have any doubts that dogs, cats, monkeys and small children are conscious in their own particular and therefore subjective way. Thus the ontology of their mental has an irreducible first-person mode.

When we are asked to form a world view or a world picture, we form these on the model of vision. But when we visualise the world, we can't see consciousness. And if we try to draw a picture of someone else's consciousness, we end up drawing the other person. If we try to draw our own consciousness, we end up drawing whatever it is that we are conscious of. Observing someone else, what I see is him and his behaviour, and the relation between his behaviour and the environment. I cannot observe my own inner goings-on either, for where conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed, between the perception and the object observed. There is no mirror independent of myself.

For that reason, the idea that there might be a special method to investigate consciousness, namely by introspection, supposed to be a kind of inner observation, was doomed to failure right from the start, and it is not surprising that the introspective psychology proved bankrupt. There is, in short, no way for us to picture subjectivity as part of our world view because the subjectivity is the picture. And the metaphor of the inner space breaks down too when we understand that there isn't anything like a space into which I can enter, because I cannot make the necessary distinction between these three elements: myself, the act of entering and the space wherein I am supposed to enter.

5. Conclusion.

In Searle's own terms, it might very well be that my review of "The Rediscovery of the Mind" is rather subjective. And to use his own terminology, it will be subjective on the epistemic as well as on the ontological level. But even if I cannot enter the mental space of Searle and, although I cannot estimate the whole scope and import of the mind in this

brilliant work, it is in my opinion a remarkable document (seen from the epistemic level, thus from the outside, of course). It is impressive not only because of what is said explicitly, but also because of what can be implicitly deduced from it. Indeed, many deductions are to be made and should be made. Thus, the reader's task merely starts as the book is finished.

Carlos Holvoet