John R. Searle
Freedom and Neurobiology: Reflections on Free Will, Language, and Political Power.
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This book locates two seemingly disparate topics, the problems of metaphysical freedom and of political power, within Searle's overarching philosophical project of explaining how our view of ourselves as conscious persons can be reconciled with the 'basic facts' we know about the universe from natural science. The slim volume is divided into three roughly equal parts: an introduction and two chapters. While admirable for its ability concisely to connect relatively distant philosophical topics, it is predictably rather light on detail and brief in its treatment of potential objections against Searle's views.

The Introduction, 'Philosophy and the Basic Facts', recounts the peculiar origins of the book, which began as a pair of lectures Searle did not originally intend to publish together. Once published in French unexpectedly as a single volume, Searle was pleased to produce an English version that would allow an explanation of how both lectures form 'parts of a much larger philosophical enterprise' (3). In Searle's view, that enterprise involves answering 'the one overriding question in contemporary philosophy': how it is possible to reconcile our particular conception we have of ourselves as 'mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, etc. agents' with the 'basic facts' we know about a physical universe 'that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, unfree, nonrational, brute physical particles' (4-5).

Searle's introductory chapter divides the task of reconciling our self-conception and the 'basic facts' into eight fields of investigation: consciousness, intentionality, language, rationality, free will, society and institutions, politics, and ethics (4-14). In each case, the task is to provide a 'naturalistic' resolution that preserves our self-conception while showing its compatibility with the basic facts of science. Searle also argues for logical relationships among the problem areas. His categorizations, definitions, and statements of the relations between the constituent problem areas of philosophy in the first half of the chapter are clear and helpful. Less enlightening is his compressed, aggressive defense of his own position in the chapter's second half. Searle attacks both reductionist and eliminativist versions of materialism as well as alternative, presumably non-naturalistic approaches to the problem areas. However, his arguments against them come across mostly as impatient dismissals based on unsympathetic interpretation. For instance, he rejects Cartesian mind-body dualism as well as Popper's three-world view because both theories allegedly 'defy explanation' in terms of the basic facts and lapse into 'mystification' (22)—a charge that seems ironic in light of Searle's own defense of a subjective ontology in the following chapter. Also hasty seem his justifications of current

trends in philosophy away from a focus on epistemology and language and towards more robust system building continuous with science. While apt as a sociological description of contemporary philosophy, his rejection of epistemological skepticism seems not only quite superficial but also question begging: '[w]e simply know too much' now to take the problem of epistemological skepticism very seriously (27)!

The chapter 'Free Will as a Problem in Neurobiology' applies Searle's naturalistic, non-reductionist view of mind to the problem of free will. He rejects without explanation any form of compatibilism, declaring that as he uses the terms 'free will and determinism are not compatible' (47). He thus aims to show how free will, including our veridical experience of a 'gap' between antecedent conditions and voluntary decisions and actions, exists in the same physical being whose brain and bodily behavior are describable in neurobiological terms. Searle argues cogently for a two-level view of the functioning of human consciousness according to which 'higher-level' conscious decisions and intentions are caused by and realized in 'lower-level' neurobiological processes involving neurons firing across synapses. But his account fails to persuade when it moves beyond clarification of how consciousness fits into the causal scheme of things to a positive account of how such a consciousness could genuinely be free. Searle rejects the 'epiphenomenalist' possibility that the state of one's brain at a given moment could fully determine what one will think and do at the next moment on the grounds that it 'goes against everything we know about evolution', because consciousness is very 'biologically expensive' and must play a genuine causal role (69). He instead affirms that conscious decisions and acts must not be wholly determined by prior brain states, which implies (given his two-level identification of consciousness and brain) that states of the brain themselves cannot be wholly determined by prior states of the brain, thus finding himself forced to embrace genuine indeterminacy in the brain based on quantum-level processes. While this conclusion is not wholly implausible, Searle fails to consider at least two key alternatives: first, that some form of compatibilism may be true, and, second, that consciousness is a vital link in a wholly deterministic physical causal chain.

Searle's chapter 'Social Ontology and Political Power' is arguably superior to the chapter on free will, and it raises questions about the relationships between intentionality, social institutions, and political power that have been implicit but not usually clearly formulated in traditional philosophy. His thesis is that political power is based on 'status functions', that is, functions imposed on objects (whether physical or conceptual) solely in virtue of 'collective acceptance' of such function (87). The domain of the political in turn involves status functions superior in authority to any others, and the authority of government, the primary political institution, trumps all other status functions (e.g., family, church, school, voluntary associations). Searle develops his view in this chapter in a series of terse insights, lightly elaborated, including the Foucauldian-sounding observation that 'all political power, though exercised from above, comes from below' (99) and that 'a monopoly on armed violence is an essential presupposition of government' (107). I would have hoped for fuller explanations, especially given the

oddity of the (apparent) fact that government can maintain itself via a sophisticated system of collective intentionality only by relying on something as crude as the threat of physical force.

Freedom and Neurobiology is a good book but not Searle's best and, at least on the topic of free will, not particularly well argued. Yet, such criticism notwithstanding, the book makes a positive contribution to the ontology of political power. Perhaps most importantly, it sets forth a suggestive vision of the systematic connections across various philosophical fields and avenues for their further exploration.

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