

Searle, Materialism, and the Mind-Body Problem

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Abstract

In *The Rediscovery of Mind*, Searle gives a spirited attempt to offer a “simple solution” to the mind-body problem in his “biological naturalism.” It is the purpose of this paper, however, to show that the solution he offers is not simple and is arguably incoherent as it currently stands. I focus on Searle’s claim that the key to solving the mind-body problem is to first reject the system of conceptual categories that underlies materialism and then adopt his biological naturalism. I argue that the positions articulated in this theory, however, appear to generate serious inconsistencies that make his proposal look either incoherent or suggestive of the sort of property dualism he wants to reject. Because Searle lacks a sufficient metaphysical scheme to produce compelling arguments against these particular accusations and because it is not clear that biological naturalism is the obvious or common-sense position he says it is, I conclude that his proposal cannot be a “simple solution.”

In his influential book, *The Rediscovery of Mind* (RM) (Searle 1992), John Searle declares that “the famous mind-body problem, the source of so much controversy over the past two millennia, has a simple solution.” (1992, 1) His proposal is simply to acknowledge that “Mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiological processes in the brain and are themselves features of the brain.” (1992, 1) Could a solution, which has proven to be such a difficult problem for philosophy of mind over the past two millennia, really be this simple? As I shall argue, Searle’s proposed solution is not as simple as acknowledging the position above. In fact, this position depends on several other

crucial assumptions that, when taken together, appear to generate inconsistencies, making it difficult for him to argue against the various property dualism accusations. I therefore conclude that without a more coherent metaphysical scheme, Searle cannot claim that his ‘solution’ is a simple one.

From the outset of RM, Searle distinguishes his view from other positions in the philosophy of mind by calling his “biological naturalism.” Generally construed, biological naturalism is the idea that “mental events and processes are as much part of our biological natural history as digestion, mitosis, meiosis, or enzyme secretion.” (1992, 1) Although Searle contends that this view is a “simple solution” to the mind-body problem, there are several steps one must take to get to this position. For example, an essential theme running throughout RM is the belief that the key to the mind-body problem is to completely reject the system of Cartesian categories, a system which Searle believes has traditionally been expressed through our dualistic vocabulary. As we shall soon discover, however, this belief ultimately rests on Searle’s particular understanding of materialism. Hence, in assessing Searle’s proposed solution to the mind-body problem, it will be necessary to first understand his thoughts regarding materialism, as he conceives it, and the fundamental problems he believes plague all varieties of materialism.

I. Materialism according to Searle

What is Searle’s conception of materialism? Searle explains that the doctrine of “materialism” does not, as the word may suggest, consist simply in the view that the world is entirely made up of material particles. He reasons that such a view does not distinguish itself from every other position found in contemporary philosophy of mind, except possibly the Cartesian dualist view that there exist

both physical and mental substances. Although materialism would obviously be opposed to the Cartesian view of reality, it is not, according to Searle, simply the system of thought defined solely as the antithesis of Cartesian dualism. For example, referring specifically to the three Australian ‘identity theorists’, J.J.C. Smart,¹ U.T. Place,² and D. Armstrong,³ Searle states: “it seems clear that when they assert the identity of the mental with the physical, they are claiming something more than simply the denial of Cartesian substance dualism.” (1992, 27)

Searle suggests that these philosophers distinguish their materialism from other non-Cartesian theories (the mere denial of the Cartesian ontological categories) by further denying the existence of any irreducible mental properties in the world or phenomenological properties⁴ attributed to consciousness (qualia, etc.). (1992, 27) Materialism of the identity variety (Smart 1965), explains Searle, attempts to get a description of mental features in terms of ‘topic-neutral’ vocabulary that does not mention the fact that they are mental. (1992, 37) In fact, affirming the existence of such irreducible mental features is often seen as subscribing to “property dualism,” which from the materialist’s point of view is just as untenable as substance dualism. Although Searle rejects property dualism, he makes it clear that he does not agree with this common materialist assumption. He believes that it is perfectly consistent with naturalism to hold that the world is entirely composed of physical particles obeying the laws of physics while still maintaining that there are irreducible features of the mind that fit perfectly well into a naturalistic physical ontology.

The view that there are irreducible features of the mind coupled with the belief that everything that exists is nevertheless entirely physical has led many to accuse Searle of being a property dualist. Searle, however, emphatically denies this accusation.⁵ (1992, 13-14) So on what grounds does he make this denial? He explains that he rejects property and substance dualism for the same reasons he rejects materialism. (1992, 28) The problem with all these positions, according to Searle, is that they consider the mental and

physical to be mutually exclusive, that is, “because mental states are intrinsically mental, they cannot be in that very respect, physical.” (2004, 81) However, Searle holds that “because they are intrinsically mental, they are a certain type of biological state, and therefore a fortiori they are physical.” (2004, 81) As far as he is concerned, the materialists are incorrect when charging him with being a property dualist on account of introducing irreducible mental features because they mistakenly assume that the naturalistic belief that everything is physical is incompatible with the view that there are irreducible mental properties. So Searle contends that accepting both the existence of irreducible features of mind and the idea that everything is physical does not force one into adopting some variety of property dualism. Materialism, as he understands it, assumes that our only choice in categorizing reality is to say that it is either ontologically one (monism) or it is dualistic (property or substance dualism); therefore, when they reason that dualism is untenable, they are obliged to conclude that monism is the only option. As we shall see, a crucial point behind Searle’s “simple solution” is his belief that both ‘monism’ and ‘dualism’ themselves are actually confused and ambiguous categories: “They both accept a certain vocabulary and with it a set of assumptions.” (1992, 2) There is much leading up to this assertion. In the following sections I will examine Searle’s attempt to show that this vocabulary (dualistic vocabulary) is in fact obsolete and the assumptions materialism makes are, as he sees it, false. It will prove useful to our examination to first define Searle’s particular conception of materialism by examining what he sees as its common assumptions and definite methodological presuppositions.

II. Materialism's Common Assumptions and Methodological Presuppositions

Searle discusses the foundations of classical materialism in RM by addressing what he identifies as its common assumptions and methodological presuppositions, which he lists as follows:

- (1) Where the scientific study of the mind is concerned, consciousness and its special features are of rather minor importance. [...]
- (2) Science is objective. [...]
- (3) Because reality is objective, the best method in the study of the mind is to adopt the objective or third-person point of view. [...]
- (4) From the third-person, objective point of view, the only answer to the epistemological question 'How would we know about the mental phenomena of another system?' is: We know by observing its behaviour [...]
- (5) Intelligent behaviour and causal relations to intelligent behaviour are in some way the essence of the mental [...]
- (6) Every fact in the universe is in principle knowable and understandable by human investigators. [...]
- (7) The only things that exist are ultimately physical, as the physical is traditionally conceived, that is, as opposed to the mental. (1992, 10–11)

With respect to (1), Searle believes that materialism aspires to give an account of the mind by describing language, cognition, and functional mental states, yet it assumes this can be accomplished without paying attention to facts about consciousness as a first-personal subjective state. In qualifying (2), he states that it is assumed that science is actually objective, "not only in the sense that it strives to reach conclusions that are independent of personal biases and points of view, but more important, it concerns a reality that is objective." (1992, 10) In other words, the idea that science is objective

is derived from the fact that all of reality (including mental states) is objective. Hence, on this assumption it would follow that the best way to study the mind is to proceed in the same way we study objective reality, i.e., by adopting the third-person/objective point of view (3). Searle summarizes the traditional materialist position, stating: “The objectivity of science requires that the phenomena studied be completely objective, and in the case of cognitive science this means that it must study objectively observable behaviour.” (1992, 10) Therefore, from materialism’s common assumptions, it necessarily follows that a scientific study of the mind is simply a study of intelligent behaviour.

To the epistemological question of how we know about the mental phenomena of another person or system, the only solution for the materialist according to Searle’s analysis must be (4), “We know by observing its behaviour.” He argues that given the materialist’s previous assumptions and commitments, this can be the only solution to the “other minds problem.” (1992, 10–11) For example, he explains that “A basic question, perhaps the basic question, in the study of the mind is the epistemological question: How would we know whether or not some other ‘system’ has such-and-such mental properties? And the only scientific answer is: By its behaviour.” (1992, 10–11) As he sees it, epistemology, therefore, only becomes significant for the materialist insofar as science is required to identify and distinguish mental systems from the rest of reality and natural phenomena. On this supposition this can only happen by observing and studying behaviour.

Searle’s contention is that if we restrict ourselves to the aforementioned materialist assumptions, then there is nothing more to the mental other than what is observed in intelligent behaviour and causal relations to intelligent behaviour. (1992, 11) By way of further explanation, he writes:

Adherence to the view that there is an essential connection between mind and behaviour range all the way from the extreme version of behaviourism that says there isn’t

anything to having mental states except having dispositions to behaviour, to the functionalists attempt to define mental notions in terms of internal and external causal relations, to Wittgenstein's (1953, para. 580) puzzling claim, "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria." (1992, 11)

Point (6), that every fact in the universe is in principle knowable by us, is supposed to follow from prior assumptions held by the materialists: namely, that all of reality must be physical, science only concerns itself with physical reality, and in principle there "are no limits on what we can know of physical reality." (1992, 10–11) Searle shows that from these common assumptions it would follow that "all of the facts in the universe are knowable and understandable by us." (1992, 11) Because there is an adherence to the belief that all of reality is physical, traditionally conceived as being opposed to the mental, there follows a sort of vernacular and categorical dualism in which the physical is affirmed and the mental is denied.⁶

Searle's assessment of the aforementioned assumptions is that there is a particular logical order in which these views hang together that, according to him, reveals the materialist's philosophical commitments and methodological presuppositions. Summarizing his argument, he reasons it should be clear that adherence to (2), "reality is objective," leads to (7), "everything is physical." Taken together, (2) and (7) lead to (3), "the best study of the mind is done by way of the third-person point of view." From (3) naturally follows (4), which states that "we only know mental phenomena by observing behaviour." However, as Searle argues, "If the mind really exists and has an objective ontology, then it appears its ontology must be in some sense behavioural and causal." (1992, 11) Again, this is point (5) of materialism's methodological presuppositions, which he believes inevitably hangs upon the epistemological tenet (4), that "we only know about the mental through observing behaviour." (1992, 11) He then proceeds to argue that from the assumption that "all reality is ultimately physical," point (7), together with the belief

that “everything is completely objective,” point (2), it is deduced by the materialists that “everything in reality is in principle knowable to us” point (6). It is Searle’s belief that in taking all the points in this particular order, it becomes obvious to the materialist that “There is no place or at least very little place for consciousness in this overall picture.” (1992, 12) At this juncture we may want to ask ourselves whether materialism is really committed to these theses, i.e., whether Searle has fairly represented the alleged materialist orthodoxy. For the present purpose I will assume that, whether implicitly or explicitly, classical materialism has been accurately represented in Searle’s list of materialism’s common assumptions and methodological presuppositions.⁷ Although the clarification of this list of presuppositions does not by itself entail a resolution of the mind-body problem, Searle’s intention in providing this list is to identify the target of his assault and exactly what is at stake, which for Searle is most importantly the real existence of consciousness as a first-person subjective phenomenon.

III. The Historical Origins of Materialism

In an attempt to better understand Searle’s particular conception of materialism and thus also his argument against that entire tradition, let us examine his explanation of how we got ourselves into the particular problem outlined in the previous section. Searle remarks that, “If we were to think of the philosophy of mind over the past fifty years as a single individual, we would say of that person that he is a compulsive neurotic, and his neurosis takes the form of repeating the same pattern of behaviour over and over.” (1992, 31) What is the “repeating the same pattern of behaviour” that Searle speaks of here? The answer is found in his discussion of the origins of materialism itself. In identifying the historical origins of materialism, Searle notes that we are all working within a given tradition.

He then explains that consequently certain questions and their respective answers are necessarily formed in the context of one's own tradition. In other words, our conceptual framework, inherited from a given tradition, makes our particular questions appear to be the right sort of questions to ask. (1992, 12) A look into the tradition of materialism, as Searle suggests, reveals several answers to the question of why materialism has emerged and gained significance within philosophy. The first factor relating to its emergence and popularity, according to Searle, is the fear of falling into Cartesian dualism. (1992, 13) A consequence of this fear is that "some philosophers are reluctant to admit the existence of consciousness because they fail to see that the mental state of consciousness is just an ordinary biological, that is, physical, feature of the brain." (1992, 13) This reluctance, he believes, arises in part from the fear that admitting obvious facts about mental phenomena will lead to accepting other facts implicit in Cartesian dualism. To put it another way, many find only two options to choose from—either some type of materialism or some variation on dualism. (1992, 14) Searle therefore concludes that a fear of dualism often leads to a belief in materialism.

As we had noted earlier, Searle asserts that we are all working within a given tradition; however, the point that he is trying to make is that we have mistakenly adopted a certain vocabulary from the Cartesian tradition and find ourselves "historically conditioned" (1992, 14) to think and operate within this vocabulary. This vocabulary, according to him, "includes a series of apparent oppositions: 'physical' versus 'mental,' 'body' versus 'mind,' 'materialism' versus 'mentalism,' 'mentalism' versus 'spirit.'" (1992, 14) Materialism, in his view, is one tradition that has inherited this vocabulary embodying these categories of opposition. He believes that the acceptance of this traditional dualistic vocabulary, which expresses the inadequate system of Cartesian categories, is one of the distinguishing features of materialism. He insists that the persistence of this type of vocabulary has generated such "odd terminology" as: "property dualism," "anomalous monism," and "token identity." (1992, 15) Admittedly, other traditional philosophical terms do not always

bear the clear meanings they purport to bear; however, Searle's point is that "there are several nouns and verbs that look as if they had a clear meaning and actually stood for well-defined objects and activities—'mind,' 'self,' and 'introspection' are obvious examples." (1992, 15) He concludes that even the terms that cognitive science employs have many of the same problems as well; for example, terms such as "intelligence," "cognition," "information processing," etc., he contends, all carry ambiguous and imprecise meanings. (1992, 15) It is apparent that in the practice of philosophy and cognitive science there are not always adequately defined notions and the meaning of terms can often be quite ambiguous. These are all examples, for Searle, in which accepting an inadequate vocabulary has led to definite philosophical and scientific problems. According to Searle, these are problems either because they have generated ambiguous meanings or because they have actually committed categorical errors (e.g., assuming 'physical' is opposed to 'mental' and vice versa) that lead to the sort of intractable mind-body problems we find discussed in the current literature.

As in the case of so many philosophical problems, Searle believes these difficulties can often be solved by showing that somewhere along the line we have adopted false presuppositions.⁸ In the philosophy of mind, his contention is that the most troublesome false presuppositions are actually contained in the terminology itself. He asserts that "Once we overcome . . . the presupposition that the mental and the physical naively construed are mutually exclusive, then it seems to me we have a solution to the traditional mind-body problem." (1992, 15) The problem with materialism, according to Searle, is that it has a false presupposition built into its very terminology which commits itself to naming mutually exclusive categories of reality, i.e. mental versus physical. For example, when we say that consciousness is a higher-level physical feature of the neurophysiological brain, materialism tempts us into thinking this means "physical-as-opposed-to-mental" (1992, 15) and that consciousness should therefore only be described in "objective behavioural or neurophysiological terms." (1992, 15) However, because Searle himself

ultimately argues that “consciousness qua consciousness, qua mental, qua subjective” (1992, 15) is something physical, and that it is physical because it is mental, he concludes that the traditional vocabulary of materialism is therefore completely inadequate. Just as with the previous examples where similar terminology often lacks a clear or precise meaning (e.g., mind, self, introspection, etc.), accepting the problematic traditional vocabulary of materialism is what, according to his view, has led to the intractable difficulties with the mind-body problem itself.

Searle’s attempt to locate the errors of materialism by way of a historical analysis in chapter two of RM appears promising. Even Daniel Dennett comments that if Searle “can show that he is an acute and sympathetic interpreter of the processes of thought that have led to the impasse, we will at least be given grounds for supposing that he may indeed have uncovered an overlooked opportunity of major proportions.”⁹ However, the common objection to Searle’s proposal is that on final analysis he does not live up to the standards he has set for himself. Why is this exactly?

Critics such as Dennett argue that Searle’s treatment of the history of materialism is an oversimplification. Dennett remarks that “the execution of this review is unfortunate, and [Searle’s] other discussions of alternative positions later in the book are equally unprepossessing. We enter a world of breathtaking oversimplification, everything black and white, with no shades of gray permitted.”¹⁰ Although it may be true that Searle’s treatment of the history of materialism is in some sense a simplified account, it certainly makes a strong *prima facie* case that modern materialism has inherited a vocabulary that has built into it distinctions that are derived from classical Cartesian dualism, which if they prove to be dubious, the rejection of such erroneous categories would admittedly be part of a move towards a solution. Possessing a sketch of a solution, however, is not the same as actually having one, and as it stands, the mere rejection of materialism and the traditional Cartesian categories does not solve the mind-body problem. Nevertheless, one could ask whether Searle thinks that such a rejection would in fact

constitute a resolution. Is this what he means by a “simple solution”: that if we reject materialism with its inherited vocabulary, the problem will just go away? His belief that there is no mind-body problem, other than in the minds of some philosophers,¹¹ and assertion that “Once we overcome . . . the presupposition that the mental and the physical naively construed are mutually exclusive, then it seems to me we have a solution to the traditional mind-body problem,”¹² (2001, 492) would seem to imply this. The basic idea is that if materialism and dualism are the sole cause of the mind-body problem, then our rejection of them would solve the problem. This looks like a simplification, and perhaps an instance of the dubious advice that ‘if we ignore it, it will just go away.’ If he wants to provide an acceptable solution to the mind-body problem, he will have to do more than assert that it is as simple as denying materialism and its erroneous Cartesian categories. He must show how it is necessary to adhere to his biological naturalism in constructing a solution. It appears from our analysis of his views on this that his avowedly “simple solution” to the mind-body problem is not in fact a one step solution (the mere rejection of materialism with its Cartesian categories), but at the very least, it involves two steps—the rejection of materialism with its erroneous opposed categories and the coherent articulation and defence of biological naturalism as the correct alternative. We shall soon see that due to certain difficulties with biological naturalism, Searles proposed “simple solution” is neither simple nor obvious—and in fact, as it stands, it is not a solution.

IV. Common-Sense and Science According to Searle

Why does Searle think that rejecting materialism with its inherited Cartesian categories and adopting biological naturalism is the key to solving the mind-body problem? At this point let us digress briefly to consider his thoughts on common-sense and science, specifically as they relate to his understanding of materialism and biological naturalism, in order that we may gain further insight into his overall argument. Essential to Searle's particular formulation of materialism is his belief that there are common tendencies within materialism to persist in objectifying all phenomena. In other words, as we saw, his contention is that not only does materialism assume everything is physical, it holds that the physical domain contains only objective, observer-independent features. According to Searle this conclusion is derived from the assumption, common in science and philosophy, that all reality is objective (observer-independent features); that is, "We have the conviction that if something is real, it must be equally accessible to all competent observers." (1992, 16) Often referred to as the *third person objective point of view*, the idea is that if something is real, then it must be objective and therefore accessible to any observer and described, in theory, in the same way. Searle urges his readers to understand that this assumption has inevitably led to the belief that "the only 'scientific' way to study the mind is as a set of objective phenomena." (1992, 16) In his view, this tenet is at the center of materialism and can be shown to be an error that is very much responsible for many of our current difficulties with the mind-body problem. Furthermore, the belief that the third-person analysis of the mind is the only scientifically legitimate way to investigate such phenomena has inevitably led, Searle argues, to the philosophical development of theories such as behaviourism, functionalism, strong AI, and eliminative materialism. (1992, 17)

Searle presents his own position, in contrast to the materialist views, as being a common-sense view of mind, which clearly implies that the theories mentioned above are uncommonsensical. He sees his own position as the common-sense view primarily because he thinks preserving the first-person subjective features of consciousness fits with our experience and that to deny this is actually uncommonsensical.¹³ Nevertheless, given that the common-sense view has a somewhat dark history, especially in light of the scientific revolution, Searle will need to show how his alleged common-sense philosophy is supposed to be compatible with a contemporary scientific worldview. Daniel Dennett has written:

Recognizing ... that common sense has had an embarrassing history of bowing to scientific revolution in the past, Searle is particularly intent to challenge the arguments that claim that functionalism (and its family of supporting doctrines) is nothing more than an application of standard scientific method to the phenomena of mind.¹⁴

Since Searle believes that his own theory of the mind, and not that of the functionalists and the materialists, is an application of the scientific method and simultaneously the view of common-sense, he not only needs to demonstrate that modern materialism is not such an application, he must reveal that his view of the mind is. This will no doubt be a difficult task for Searle; however, he is not alone in this undertaking. Many philosophers, especially those whose theories restrict themselves to the ontology of current or envisioned science, have had the difficult task of harmonizing 'common-sense' with the scientific theories that are often counter common-sense.¹⁵ Their attempts frequently involve the assumption that the scientific theory is the "real story" and common-sense is the nave view of reality. Searle, however, believes that the real story about the mind is also commonsensical, which may make his task a little less formidable. Nevertheless, we can expect that any attempt from Searle to harmonize¹⁶ these two views (scientific account and common-sense) will

be plagued with difficulties. For example, he must demonstrate that the materialist theories that he is critiquing are not an application of the modern scientific method. To accomplish this, he will need to show that these theories either leave out some essential feature of the mind or that they commit some fundamental mistake when it comes to the way that we ought to study mental phenomena in science. Our attempt to locate these arguments leads us to the next section.

V. Searle's Arguments against the Doctrine of Materialism

In *The Rediscovery of the Mind* we discover that Searle characterizes the materialist, whether it's a behaviourist, identity theorist, or functionalist, as someone committed to the belief that subtracting consciousness (consciousness as essentially first-person subjective feature) from a mental state, still leaves a mental state for us to study and explain. Searle thinks that this commitment is apparent from the fact that materialists confuse fundamentally distinct questions and categories that he believes must be carefully distinguished if there is to be a successful scientific investigation of the mind. Since understanding any phenomenon requires an analysis of its ontological, epistemological, and causal dimensions, Searle believes that in science we should ask the following categorical questions: "what is it?" (ontological); "how do we know about it?" (epistemological); and "what does it do?" (causal).¹⁷ His contention is that behaviourism, for example, confuses the epistemological question with the ontological question. Searle argues that with behaviourism one would allegedly find out about the ontology of mental states by simply observing behaviour, and it is this presupposition that feeds the conclusion that mental states consist in nothing more than behaviour

and dispositions to behaviour.¹⁸ He believes that functionalism, on the other hand, confuses the causation question with the ontological question. Since the functionalist believes “mental states have causal relations to input stimuli, other mental states, and output behaviour,” (1991, 47) they are left to conclude that mental states must therefore only consist in having these causal relations alone. Hence, for Searle, the functionalist answers the “what is it?” question with a causal answer, “mental states are simply causal relations.”

With respect to epistemological considerations pertaining to mental features such as consciousness, Searle contends that “we have no conception of an unconscious mental state except in terms derived from conscious mental states.” (1992, 19) Consequently, assuming for the sake of argument that Searle were right about this, this would mean that in studying the mind there is no way to avoid studying consciousness; and the study of consciousness necessarily invokes descriptive language that can only be expressed in *consciousness lingo*. He therefore believes that, from an epistemological point of view, a commitment to the reality of subjective consciousness is unavoidable and the first-person, subjective ontology cannot be eliminated from the study of the mind. We can reasonably conclude from this that Searle interprets materialism as being a position that maintains the possibility of eliminating phenomenological consciousness in some way from the study of the mind while still preserving a legitimate science of cognition. However, as we have seen, he believes that in order for a theory to be truly scientific, it must keep the *ontological*, *epistemological*, and *causal* categories distinct. Eliminating the first-person, subjective ontology of consciousness because of a fundamental misunderstanding over ontological and epistemological categories shows that materialism cannot be a true application of the scientific method according to Searle. He believes that this confusion arises, in part, due to our general convictions about knowledge (the epistemological category), namely, that we ought to eliminate subjectivity in an attempt to obtain objectivity. However, for Searle, it does not follow (ontologically speaking) that everything that is real is objective (objective-observer-independent).

In RM he explains that there is widespread confusion between the claim that “one should try to eliminate personal subjective biases from the pursuit of objective truth” (1992, 19) and the claim that “reality is objective and contains no subjective elements.” (1992, 19) He sees this as another example whereby one confuses epistemological and ontological questions. As we have seen, he believes that materialism has failed to heed this distinction and states that this “tradition tries to study the mind as if it consisted of neutral phenomena, independent of consciousness and subjectivity.” (1992, 19) For him, it is apparent how this would lead to the idea that we can only describe things like beliefs (apparent subjective states) in terms of external behaviour, an idea that he argues is common both to behaviourism and functionalism. Searle also refers to more extreme versions of materialism, such as those which attempt to eliminate consciousness altogether by asserting that beliefs do not really exist, existing only in a “manner of speaking.” Although it is more than likely an oversimplification of the available positions, he nevertheless identifies this belief as a form of eliminative materialism, a belief he thinks isn’t the proper application of the scientific method due to its fundamental confusion over epistemological and ontological questions.¹⁹ Searle believes that a solution to the mind body problem should be consistent with the scientific method. This position must deny materialism and replace it with something that can explain the facts, avoid the errors of materialism, and remain faithful to our modern scientific method. His biological naturalism is supposed to fulfil these criteria.

VI. Is Biological Naturalism a Simple Solution?

Having examined Searle's explanation for why materialism is not an appropriate application of the modern scientific method, we found that his argument centers on what he believes is a failure to properly distinguish the ontological, epistemological, and causal categories when carrying out a study of the mind. We also found that he believes materialism should be rejected because it leads us to think in erroneous dualistic categories, which are in themselves the source of the mind-body problem. We have seen that he proposes his biological naturalism as the only reasonable alternative and argues that accepting it will immediately resolve the problem.

Although we focused on Searle's particular notion of materialism and why he thinks it should be rejected, we have not critically assessed his biological naturalism, which is supposed to be the 'simple' solution to the mind-body problem itself. At the start of this paper, biological naturalism was presented as the position that "mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiological processes in the brain and are themselves features of the brain." (1992, 1) In this final section I want to argue that, far from being a simple solution, this position rests on many assumptions about the nature of mental processes that threaten the coherence of his biological naturalism and would seem to lead to some variety of property dualism after all.

In *Mind*, Searle states his biological naturalism in four theses, which I've summarized as follows:

1. Consciousness is a *real* ontologically irreducible mental feature of the physical world.
2. Consciousness is causally reducible and therefore both caused by and entirely explainable by the lower-level interactions in the neurophysiological brain.

3. Consciousness, a higher-level system feature of the brain, is biological and therefore a physical feature of the brain.
4. Mental states (higher-level features) are causally efficacious, meaning that they can causally affect other mental states as well as lower-level physiological events and processes.

Since Searle proposes his biological naturalism as a “simple solution” to the mind-body problem, the least we would expect is that the theses outlined above not pose any serious philosophical problems. However, when taken together they appear to generate serious inconsistencies within biological naturalism itself. It can be argued²⁰ that while any individual tenet may appear reasonable and true, the theory becomes incoherent when several of the theses are held in conjunction with one another. If we take (1) and (3), for example, we understand Searle to be saying that consciousness is both a mental and physical feature of the world. Assuming both physicalism and substance monism, however, every feature is either a mental property or a physical property. Hence, consciousness is either a mental property or a physical property. It cannot be both. The problem for Searle then is that he has to either deny that consciousness is both a mental and physical feature of the world or reject substance monism. If he rejects substance monism, he would be implicitly endorsing a form of property dualism. However, we know that Searle emphatically and explicitly rejects property dualism. He cannot accept property dualism and deny it at the same time.

Because theses (1) and (3) appear to be incompatible with one another, the position that consciousness is both a mental and physical feature of the world becomes untenable. A possible way around this dilemma is to assert that mental states, such as consciousness, are identical with brain states. But since this is the identity theorist’s position, and something Searle does not want to embrace, it cannot be how he wants us to understand his biological naturalism.

There might be another way out of this contradiction, however. What if it were possible to reject the identity theory yet still maintain that mental states are identical with brain states? Searle does

say that consciousness, a higher-level feature, is simply the state that the brain is in. The problem with this is that when he states that “consciousness is just a brain process,” (2004, 88) he goes on to explain that consciousness is an *aspect* of the brain, “the aspect that consists of ontologically subjective experiences.” (2004, 89) Are we to understand that there is a difference between saying ‘consciousness is a brain state’ and asserting ‘consciousness is an aspect of the brain?’ It would appear so, since the materialist also holds that ‘consciousness is a brain state,’ and Searle maintains that his own position is essentially different from materialism. Perhaps his earlier comment that the mental and physical are not opposed offers him a way out. If the two are not opposed, one could conclude that mental states are identical to physical states in the brain, but this brings us back to Searle’s general criticisms of the identity theory.²¹ To overcome this objection Searle will have to contend that mental states, which as we have seen he in some contexts suggests are identical to brain states, are not identical to any particular neurophysiological parts or processes going on in the brain. Rather, they are identical to system-features of the brain as a whole, when the brain is in certain states as a whole.²² It is perhaps a distinction of this kind that Searle thinks enables him to reject both token and type identity theories while still maintaining a physical identity between mental and brain states (in the form of ‘higher-level system-features’ of the brain as a whole), when he states that “Consciousness is just a brain process” (2004, 88) and “it is just *the state that the brain is in.*” (2004, 146) However, does this really amount to a physical identity between mental states and brain states? If mental states are not identical to any particular neurophysiological feature or process of the brain, then they can only be identical to physical features of the whole brain. Therefore, mental states are not *identical* to particular brain states, they are only identical to the particular state that the brain as a whole is in.

Is Searle finally in a place where he can maintain that consciousness is both a mental and physical state of the brain without falling into property dualism? Unfortunately, his rejection of substance

monism seems to undo the work we have done above. The dilemma that ‘every feature is either a mental property or physical property’ is solved only by adopting a position that looks much like property dualism. Even if he can show that consciousness is both a mental and physical feature of the brain, even if he argues that mental states are identical to the state that the brain is in, his contention that consciousness is an ontologically irreducible high-level feature of low-level features and processes of the brain still appears to lead to a form of property dualism. How does he propose to answer such an objection? He responds by simply denying that his biological naturalism is a version of property dualism. Surely he will have to do better than that.

In his defense, however, we do discover that all varieties of property dualism are, at the very least, committed to the idea that there exist properties (e.g. mental properties) that are distinct from physical properties. Since he denies that mental properties are distinct from physical ones, he can plausibly maintain that his theory is not a form of property dualism. Furthermore, thesis (2) gives him a way to further distinguish his view from property dualism by asserting that consciousness, a higher-level feature, is causally reducible and entirely explainable by what goes on in the lower-level neurophysiology of the brain. I am not convinced, however, that these two assertions are enough to overcome the objection that his position is but a novel form of property dualism insofar as it divides the world up into high and low-level features (properties). Although he deploys additional arguments to defend his position from these accusations of property dualism (e.g., liquidity and solidity²³ are higher-level features of the entire system of molecules, higher and lower-levels²⁴ are simply different ways to view and describe properties, etc.), he must still expend a considerable amount of effort to show that biological naturalism is not just another variety of property dualism. Although for my own part I ultimately agree with Searle’s position that mental phenomena are both caused by and realized in the processes and neurophysiological structures of the brain, that mental states are both physical and ontologically irreducible, and that

these positions can be affirmed without accepting some version of property dualism, for the reasons given above I do not believe that Searle has as yet provided a successful defense of the coherence of this outlook on the mind-body problem. I do not believe that Searle has the metaphysical repertoire or a sufficiently robust enough conceptual scheme to argue for his position without actually appearing to be a property dualist or without rendering his biological naturalism incoherent. Therefore, without a more coherent metaphysical scheme that would avoid these difficulties, he cannot claim that his 'solution' is simple.

Perhaps by 'simple', Searle means obvious, which is what he seems to suggest when he explains that a solution has been available to us "since serious work began on the brain nearly a century ago." (1992, 1) If this is the case, then why have we not noticed it until now? According to Searle, we have inherited a certain Cartesian vocabulary and with it certain assumptions that make what would otherwise be obvious appear difficult. It is his contention that since functionalism and materialism are primarily responsible for keeping us historically conditioned to think and operate within this mistaken vocabulary, rejecting these positions should make a solution to the mind-body problem obvious and, therefore, simple. I am not convinced, however, that rejecting materialism (and its family of supporting doctrines) makes it clear that the position, "mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiological processes in the brain and are themselves features of the brain," (1992, 1) is obvious, as Searle says it is. For example, Gilbert Ryle (1949) points out that the most common view people hold about the nature and place of minds (the official doctrine)²⁵ is that mind is not a feature of the brain but attached to it as something distinct (Cartesian dualism); therefore, it would appear that rejecting materialism wouldn't leave biological naturalism as obvious but something like Cartesian dualism. Searle might reply that it is not simply materialism he is urging us to reject, but rather the whole system of Cartesian categories and vocabulary, which both materialism and dualism have accepted. Thus if we reject dualism with materialism, then the obvious and

common-sense answer would be something like what is stated in biological naturalism. Nevertheless, I think that what Searle means by ‘simple’ isn’t just ‘the view that’s obvious’ but that the view, i.e., biological naturalism, is an easy solution to the mind-body problem. Again, because of the difficulties that his biological naturalism faces on account of what I believe is an insufficient metaphysical scheme, Searle’s proposal cannot be a simple solution to the mind-body problem until, as Jaegwon Kim (1995, 189) points out, his metaphysics is rethought from the bottom up.²⁶

Conclusion

We have seen that Searle has argued for the following positions: materialism is unable to explain how mental states are both “caused by” and “realized in” the neurophysiological process of the brain; materialism’s categorical dualism is the primary cause of the mind-body problem; and biological naturalism is the only reasonable alternative that is consistent with our scientific model and capable of accounting for the first-person subjective nature of consciousness. This final position requires that we expand our notion of physical ontology to include the mental; however, according to Searle, in doing so we will see the mind-body problem disappear. Whether or not he is correct in his assessment of materialism and his overall arguments for biological naturalism, I think that it is clear that his statement, “the famous mind-body problem, the source of so much controversy over the past two millennia, has a simple solution,” (1992, 1) is false.

Endnotes

¹J.J. C. Smart (1965) "The Identity Thesis: A Reply to Professor Garrett." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (1): 82–3.

²U.T. Place (1956) "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" *British Journal of Psychology* 47: 44–50.

³Armstrong also developed a functionalist theory; however, here Searle is referring to D. Armstrong (1968) *A Materialist Theory of Mind*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁴These are important parts of the general literature on the irreducibility of consciousness that are relevant to the issue at hand. Searle makes reference to the work of Nagel (1974), Kripke (1971), and Jackson (1982) but does not give a detailed treatment of it due to the fact that he is interested in presenting his own argument. See *The Rediscovery of Mind*, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1992), 116–117.

⁵Searle has also written an article completely devoted to this defense: Searle (2002) "Why I am not a Property Dualist." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 9 (12): 57–64.

⁶"This means that in the traditional oppositions—dualism versus monism, mentalism versus materialism—the right hand term names the correct view; the left-hand term names the false view." (Searle 1992, 11)

⁷Even Daniel Dennett in his review of *The Rediscovery of the Mind* says that Searle has almost got this foundational list, i.e., materialism's common assumptions and methodological presuppositions, exactly right. He states that "As a targeted representative of orthodoxy, I for one accept all seven propositions, with only one demurrer..." (Dennett, *Journal of Philosophy*, 60, (4), Apr. 1993, pp. 194)

⁸"When we at last overcome one of these intractable problems it often happens that we do so by showing that we had made a false presupposition." (Searle, *Philosophy*, Vol. 76, No. 298, Oct., 2001, pp. 492)

⁹Taken from Daniel Dennett's article, "The Review of Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*." *Journal of Philosophy*, 60, (4), Apr. 1993, pp. 202.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Searle states in his book *Intentionality* that "They [dualists and physicalists] both attempt to solve the mind-body problem when the correct approach is to see that there is no such problem. The 'mind-body problem' is no more a real problems than the 'stomach-digestion problem'." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15.

¹²Taken from Searle's article, "Free Will as a Problem in Neurobiology" in *Philosophy*, Vol. 76, No. 298 (Oct., 2001): 491-514.

¹³Searle's claim is obviously highly controversial and a topic for debate. For example, the functionalists think the common-sense view is functionalism; Ryle thinks it's largely Rylean rather than Cartesian; the Aristotelians believe it's

Aristotle's metaphysics, etc. In fact, many opposed positions think they preserve sound aspects of our pre-theoretical, 'common sense' view of the mind. A reasonable conclusion from all this is that Searle doesn't have exclusive rights to the term 'common sense.'

¹⁴Dennett 1993, 194.

¹⁵An example of this can be found in what some have referred to as the *clash of images* problem, arising out of Wilfrid Sellars's work in his 1962 essay, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man." Here Sellars discusses certain philosophical problems of how it is possible to harmonize two apparently clashing views: the "manifest image," which is what our common-sense reveals about the world, and the "scientific image," which is supposedly the true account of the world, but it appears fundamentally irreconcilable with our common-sense, "manifest image" view of the world.

¹⁶Searle acknowledges and addresses this issue of 'harmonizing' the two views in his article, "What is to Be Done?" *Topoi* 25 (2006): 101–08.

¹⁷Apart from RM, we find in his article, "Consciousness, Unconsciousness and Intentionality," *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 1 (1991): 45–66, Searle formulating an argument against materialism that centers on making these crucial distinctions about *ontology*, *epistemology*, and *causation*.

¹⁸Searle 1991, 47.

¹⁹"Once we have located the place of consciousness in our overall world view, we can see that the materialist theories of the mind we discussed in chapter 3 are just as profoundly antiscientific as the dualism they thought they were attacking." (Searle 1992, 84–85)

²⁰A similar argument is presented by K. Corcoran in his article, "The Trouble with Searle's Biological Naturalism," *Erkenntnis*, No. 3 (2001), pp. 307–324. However, different from my argument, Corcoran concludes that Searle's positions ultimately cannot be reconciled and that, therefore, his biological naturalism is actually an incoherent theory.

²¹For his objection against the identity theorists see RM, 39.

²²Searle states: "I am simply describing the whole neurobiological system at the level of the entire system and not at the level of particular microelements." (2004, 146)

²³"Think of it this way: roughly speaking, consciousness is to neurons as the solidity of the piston is to the metal molecules neither is 'over and above' the systems of which they are a part." (Searle 2004, 91)

²⁴"We are not talking about two different entities but about the same system at different levels." (Searle 2004, 89)

²⁵See Gilbert Ryle's Chapter 1, "Descartes' Myth" in *The Concept of Mind*, 11.

²⁶See Kim's article, "Mental Causation in Searle's 'Biological Naturalism'." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LV, No. 1 (March 1995): 189–194.