

BEYOND CONCEPTUAL DUALISM
Ontology of Consciousness, Mental Causation, and
Holism in John R. Searle's Philosophy of Mind

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INTRODUCTION

After the end of the 1980s, the problem of consciousness emerged from the more general philosophical and scientific discussions of the mind-body problem and

became the hard problem in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. After the birth of cognitive science and the escalation of philosophical and scientific studies grounded on the paradigm of classical computational functionalism, philosophers and scientists discussed the evolutionary efficacy of consciousness and the related problem of mental causation, on the nature and existence of qualitative mental states, on the real or merely virtual existence of the self, and on emotions and rationality.

A crucial problem overarches these issues: we need an ontology that accounts for the relations between the irreducibly different (but not independent) levels of organization in the natural world within a naturalistic conceptual framework for our analysis of mental phenomena. In the case of mind, we would like to know how mind and consciousness are a part of the natural world without leaving out those features (such as qualitiveness and subjectivity) that make mental phenomena different with respect to other natural phenomena. Ultimately, then, our model should account for the power of some biological organisms to produce and support what John R. Searle calls “conscious fields of qualitative, unified subjectivity” (2004, p. 154).

The debate over this issue, which is a part of the mind-body problem, is in Searle’s view, grounded on the disagreement between materialism (or monism, or physicalism), that argues for the scientific irrelevance or the denial of the existence of the subjective and qualitative character of mind, and a minority of scholars who argued for the irreducibility of consciousness as a subjective and qualitative phenomenon, who consider themselves property dualists or skeptics. The reasons for the difficulty, apparently, are that conscious states are characterized by “new” properties with respect to the rest of the natural world: they have a qualitative dimension, a subjective form of existence (they exist only when a subject experiences them), and they exist only within a network of other mental states, conscious and otherwise (Searle, 1983, p. 19ff.).

Many philosophers made a definite choice between these traditional positions. We have well known examples of materialism with philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, Willard van Orman Quine, Richard Rorty, Daniel C. Dennett, and many others who think that mental states are “nothing but” physical states. We also have well known examples of philosophers who think that mind is ontologically different from the physical, such as Plato, Gottfried W. Leibniz, Karl R. Popper, and David J. Chalmers.

Others tried to develop a third view to overcome this traditional monism-dualism dilemma and worked out what I here call the “desubstantialization” of mind. According to this view, mind is not a material or immaterial “substance,” but a set of processes dependent on the physical and realized in it, devoted to the mediation of the organism-environment relations but, *qua* processes, irreducible to the realizing physical system.

This view of mind is rooted in modern, postCartesian philosophy, beginning with John Locke’s thesis that mental states are not “faculties” or “substances” but “powers” or operations of an agent. On this account, thinking is not the essence of an immaterial soul, but one among the operations that an agent can perform and the function of which is to enhance the well-being of the living creature.

Consciousness, like the other operations of mind, functions in the life of a living creature and provides the conditions of identity of the self through the “centering” of

thoughts and actions on a subject: consciousness gives the creature a sense of “care” toward what it is and what it does.

Locke thinks of consciousness as analogous to biological processes: the identity of a biological process does not depend on any kind of realizing substance, but on the persistence across time of the organism and of its organization. Likewise, the identity of consciousness does not depend on the realizing substance (whether material or immaterial) but on the persistence across time of its generating process, and like a biological process, it gives its contribution to the life of the creature.

Locke’s “thinking matter hypothesis” (the thesis that purely material systems could have mental states without any immaterial soul supporting them) not only suggests, for the first time in modern philosophy, that a body could develop mental powers without the addition of a Cartesian soul, but also that the monism-dualism dilemma is the root of the conceptual problems of the traditional views of mind, because it defines “mind,” “matter,” and related concepts in such a way as to make impossible to understand how a subjective mental state could be part of the life of a natural creature.

Contemporary functionalism redefined these theses as follows: mind is not a thing, but a set of irreducible functional states of an organism, processes performing a causal role in the management of the organism-environment transactions. These processes are irreducible because they are “multiply realizable” in different physical systems. Multiple realizability means that since mental states are different in *type* with respect to physical states, but identical to single instances of different physical types for every single *token*, different physical systems can realize the same mental state. For this reason, mind is not reducible to any type of physical system, although mental processes mediate sensory information to produce actions: in this perspective, irreducibility does not mean that mind cannot causally act on the physical. On the contrary, mental states would be defined as causal roles or causal processes.

As the philosopher Jaegwon Kim points out (1998), functionalism has two fundamental flaws. The first is that it is compatible with contradictory theories of the mind-body relationship and especially of the ontology of consciousness. So, for example, Dennett discussed the problem of consciousness along the lines of a materialist, eliminative research project, Chalmers tried to integrate functionalism and property dualism, and Kim argued for the compatibility between functionalism and type identity theory. These authors conceive of mind as a set of processes, skills, and powers and not as a “thing,” but they end up with mutually incompatible conclusions on the ontology of mind and consciousness. We could say that the old monism-dualism dilemma, which functionalism wanted to overcome, returned even in this version of the desubstantialization of mind. In the end, this view of mind is not by itself sufficient to overcome the dilemma, even though it is quite useful in characterizing the dynamic and non-reducible aspects of the mental and its interactions with the body and the environment.

The second flaw is that, during the last two decades, materialism made a strong attack against non-reductive models of mind through a version of the traditional problem of mental causation: how can we give a coherent account of causal relations involving a mental state among the *relata* under the naturalistic ontological commitment to the causal closure of the physical? Or, in another formulation, if mind

is irreducible to the physical, and is therefore, in some sense, “non-physical,” we still have to explain how mind can cause something physical, such as a bodily movement.

The most sophisticated form of this problem in contemporary debate is Kim’s argument of causal exclusion. According to this argument, we have three propositions whose conjunction is inconsistent. First, physical and mental properties are different (antireductionism). Second, physics is causally closed: if we pick out a physical event and follow the chain of its causes and effects we will never find a non-physical event. Third, mental phenomena function causally.

Consider the following example: the headache (M) causes the desire (M^*) to take aspirin. Assume that the mental state M is realized by the physical state P but that it is not reducible to it and that it is causally responsible for the production of mental state M^* , in turn caused and realized by P^* . But at this point we have two possibilities.

First, we can recognize the existence of the causal relation $M \rightarrow M^*$. But this option apparently implies causal overdetermination on P^* by P and M .

Second, we can save the principle of causal closure and recognize that P is a sufficient cause of P^* . The consequence in this case is the epiphenomenalism of the level $M \rightarrow M^*$, because M would no longer be regarded as the cause of M^* .

My hypothesis is that we can overcome the problems of non-reductive models if we work out a theory of psychophysical relation that places the desubstantialization of mind within a new naturalistic framework, overcoming the monism-dualism dilemma.

This framework has its genesis in Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1975) and continues in Searle’s philosophy.

The present work reconstructs Searle’s philosophy of mind. It focuses on the relationship between consciousness, mental causation, and holism (the view that mental states exist only as a part of a network of other mental states) that allows us to conceive the conscious mind as responsible for the management of the organism-environment causal relations through the development of a preconceptual, primitive sense of the self.

Engaged in current debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science for more than twenty-five years, Searle is perhaps the most famous philosopher who recognized conscious phenomena as paradigmatic anomalies with respect to the materialist view of mind.

Within the wide philosophical literature written over the past decades on the problem of consciousness, one of the novelties of Searle’s theory is that it can offer a new conception of mind and its relation to nature, avoiding the constraints deriving from the traditional monism-dualism dilemma through a radical critique of the structure of the problem.

Searle argues, on the contrary, that the reduction of theoretical options to monism and dualism is determined by what he terms “conceptual dualism,” a set of theoretical assumptions implicitly shared by all the participants but rationally unjustified. Its main assumption is the so-called exclusion principle: mental and physical are mutually independent and exclusive ontological categories. But scientific theories, Searle says, show an explanatory device that can account for the existence

of mind without reducing or eliminating it: mind as such, then, would be compatible with the physical as such.

This is the core thesis of “biological naturalism,” as Searle calls his theory: as the states of a physical system are caused by microstructural processes and realized as macrostructural states or processes, so consciousness, with its peculiar features, is a state or process realized in the brain whose causal bases are at the lower, microstructural level of organization of the brain itself. In a sentence, conscious states are caused by and realized in the physical structure of the brain.

This relation has, according to Searle (1992, pp. 83–93), the advantage of placing the psychophysical relation within the explanatory framework of natural sciences. We can take as examples the way microphysics explains the emergence of macrofeatures such as the liquid state of water, or the way genetics and evolutionary theory explain the mechanisms underlying the development of a radically new phenomenon such as the emergence of life. These theories explain their phenomena through the same kind of relation that biological naturalism uses to explain consciousness: a system is composed of a microstructure that, at the same time, causes and realizes system macrofeatures. So, according to Searle, the conscious mind is a system, process, state, or macrofeature which causally emerges from and is realized by the brain or by any physical system with equivalent causal powers. Since consciousness is an ontologically subjective mental *and* physical process, we cannot reduce it to ontologically objective phenomena, although consciousness can be scientifically explained.

In this sense, biological naturalism is a version of the desubstantialization of mind, while we can see functionalism as an incomplete statement of it.

We could think that, as Searle has said (in conversation), functionalism shows some kind of “bashfulness” in seeing itself as engaged in an attempt to overcome monism and dualism. The reasons why I understand it this way are the denial of type identity theory and the redefinition of mind as a set of embodied processes. On my interpretation, functionalism is better viewed as an incomplete or misleading version of the desubstantialization of mind and its flaws will emerge in some more detail in this work. Here I will only give a brief sketch of them. On one side, functionalism is still a version of materialism because it tries to define the mental in non-mental terms (that is why the label of “non-reductive physicalism” could be misleading). On the other side, functionalism is incomplete because it allows mutually contradictory theories of the ontology of mind (for example, Dennett or Kim’s materialism and Chalmers’s dualism).

Biological naturalism on the contrary can answer these flaws. It integrates the desubstantialization with the critique of conceptual dualism so that it can overcome the incompleteness of functionalism. In addition, biological naturalism is not misleading with its non-reductionism because it not only recognizes multiple realizability, but also “saves” subjectivity as an irreducible part of nature.

Searle argues against materialism for the irreducibility of the subjective and qualitative consciousness of phenomena whose ontology is a third-person one (like behavior, brain processes, and functional causal roles). He also holds, against dualism, that consciousness is a part of the biological order of the natural world, as a feature causally emergent from highly complex and developed biological systems.

Once we clarify the obsolescence and inconsistency of the philosophical vocabulary for the discussion of the problem of consciousness, the recognition of the existence and irreducibility of consciousness would not lead to Cartesian dualism, but to the transformation of the mystery of consciousness into the (scientific) problem of consciousness:

The mystery is not a metaphysical obstacle to ever understanding how the brain works; rather the sense of mystery derives from the fact that at present we not only do not know how it works, but we do not even have a clear idea of how the brain *could* work to cause consciousness . . . But we have been in similar situations before. A hundred years ago it seemed a mystery that mere matter could be *alive*. . . . The mystery was resolved not just because the mechanists won and the vitalists lost the debate, but because we got a much richer conception of the mechanisms involved. Similarly with the brain. The sense of mystery will be removed when we understand the biology of consciousness with the same depth of understanding that we now understand the biology of life. (Searle, 1997, p. 201)

This ontology of mind does not solve the scientific problem of consciousness, since biological naturalism does not tell us how the brain causes and realizes the conscious mind. Biological naturalism just describes the form that an explanation of psychophysical relation has to have. Its aim is to provide the conceptual tools for a naturalistic and non-reductive research project through the removal of the logical or cultural obstacles to the development of a scientific theory of mind and consciousness.

This naturalistic view provides the framework for Searle's analysis of intentionality, the power of some mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, and others) to be "about" objects and states of affairs in the world. The logical structure of intentionality emerges in conscious life and we can describe this structure as a holistic Network of mental states. This Network is permeated by a Background of biologically and culturally shaped "know how" enabling the Network to determine the conditions of satisfaction of intentional states.

On this naturalistic, pragmatic, and non-reductive account, perception and action are the biologically and logically primitive elements of the Network because their contents are causally self-referential, where causal self-referentiality is the logical feature of the intentional contents of perception and intention by which they refer to the intentional state itself as caused by (perception) or as causing (action) its conditions of satisfaction.

Searle's conception of mind opposes "the passive subjectivity of the Cartesian tradition" (1992, p. 227) by pointing out a close relation between the ontology of mind and its causal efficacy within an evolutionary framework. Since consciousness is a qualitative, subjective, and unified part of the life of a biological organism, it performs an evolutionary role in the management of the organism-environment relations. Searle suggests, on the ground of clinical reports, that this role is the creative management of the behavior of the organism.

Antonio Damasio worked out a similar hypothesis in his neuroscientific research, but the hypothesis itself can find in Searle's philosophy of mind a suitable

logical analysis and philosophical framework, especially with the notion of causal self-referentiality. In the interpretation of Searle's theory that I am putting forward in the present work, the relations between the ontology of mind, its holistic structure, and its causal action in a naturalistic framework have at their center the notion of the self.

In this work, I will test the capability of Searle's theory to provide solutions to the problems of consciousness and mental causation. I will proceed through a critical assessment of Searle's theory in relation with the theories of some of the most influential authors in contemporary debate, such as Dennett, Chalmers, and Kim. I will especially argue that Searle's synthesis between desubstantialization of mind and critique of conceptual dualism overcomes the endemic problems of dualism and materialism exemplified by the mentioned authors and finds support in current scientific research on consciousness.

Francesca Di Lorenzo Ajello (2001, p. 16) already pointed out that the concepts of representation, Network, Background, and causal self-referentiality as presented in Searle's work can "foreshadow an 'enactivist' picture of our cognitive and affective states," with reference to the studies of the concept of *embodiment* made by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991). I will try to show that the relations between holism, ontology of mind, and mental causation (with the crucial achievement of causal self-referentiality) made explicit by Searle have *in nuce* the core elements of the recent holistic and evolutionary approaches to the problem of consciousness worked out by neuroscientists such as Gerald M. Edelman, Giulio Tononi, and Damasio.

On these views, consciousness is a holistically structured process that *qua* process is irreducible to (not identifiable with) single neurons or brain places (Edelman and Tononi, 2000). Also, the unified, holistically structured field of consciousness creates a primitive, prelinguistic, and preconceptual self-reference through which an organism can "feel" that those needs and plans of action that allow him to survive, belong to it. This makes actions more flexible and creative, and gives the organism an evolutionary advantage (Damasio, 1999

