

MIND: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION. By John R. Searle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xii, 326 pp. \$26.00.

Reviewed by Harold Fromm

With the obsolescence of traditional metaphysics and its attendant epistemology or “theory of knowledge,” the “transcendental” Reason that once enabled philosophers to solve cosmic problems from their armchairs without even looking out the window is now being supplanted by laboratories of cognitive scientists, and the information derived from them is now becoming foundational for many other disciplines as well. One of the seemingly eternal dilemmas waiting for solution on the conveyor belt of this new epistemology is the problem of consciousness. What on earth is a thought, and how does a body produce it?

This crux—what is consciousness?—is “worried,” like a ball of yarn by a cat, in a range of contemporary disciplines. The cognitive neurosciences, represented by thinkers such as Gerald Edelman and Walter Freeman, give us highly technical maps of the brain showing neurons, electrochemical forces, inputs and outputs, recursive transmission paths, and so forth, but they are always hitting, so to speak, the brick wall of consciousness. Professors of psychology, among them William Calvin, Steven Pinker, and David Barash, produce eminently readable books for more general audiences, fusing the disciplines of traditional psychology, physiology, and biology with breakthroughs from the neurosciences and insights from the humanities. At the edge of this group is Daniel Dennett, a professor of philosophy with strong enough ties to the cognitive neurosciences to produce a book, *Consciousness Explained*, in which he candidly confesses his inability *really* to explain consciousness—while it sheds all sorts of light nonetheless. John Searle, an analytic philosopher with roots in speech act theory, continues his more recent work in philosophy of mind with a summary account fittingly called *Mind: A Brief Introduction*.

Although I have seen a description of this book as suitable reading on a transatlantic flight, I would suggest that a round trip from Chicago to New Zealand might be more suitable: *Mind* is relatively “brief” but nevertheless requires the kind of serious attentiveness that takes real time.

Searle, who writes strikingly lucid prose of chatty informality, provides a rapid overview of the ways that philosophers, principally Descartes, tried and failed to bridge the mind/body divide. From there he goes on to deal with the three main problems of contemporary philosophy of mind: consciousness, free will, and the self. As a “realist” philosopher who believes not only that there is a real material world but that human beings are capable of saying true things about it, he is dedicated to providing spook-free explanations of these major quandaries. However, as an analytic, “linguistic” phi-

osopher, he depends heavily on redefining phenomena in ways that conveniently tend to eliminate the problems he has set out to solve. As things turn out, carving “reality” into highly finessed albeit demotic sentences can carry us only so far. And spooks kicked out the front door have a nasty way of sneaking in again from the rear.

Since the aim of his book is to give a final blow to age-old positions of dualism and materialism that he regards as obsolete, Searle wants to account for consciousness as being produced from the same materials as everything else—i.e., physical micro-particles of various types—while also recognizing its unique character. Dualism posits immaterial spirits—souls, selves, and thoughts with the preposterous ability to initiate bodily actions and survive physical death (but how can a thought move my arm, and what’s a “thought” anyhow?)—while materialism reduces the mind to a computer executing built-in programs, eliminating consciousness altogether.

Years earlier, Searle administered a devastating blow to those fanciers of artificial intelligence who attempted to account for human consciousness in terms of computers. In his famous “Chinese Room” fable, Searle imagined himself as a human being who could correctly answer in Chinese questions posed in that language even though he didn’t understand a word. He could perform this feat by using a rule book that showed him how to manipulate Chinese symbols without knowing what they meant. Contrasting this performance with his ability to answer questions in English, Searle remarked, “In English, I understand what the words mean, in Chinese I understand nothing. In Chinese, I am just a computer. . . . The computer operates by manipulating symbols . . . whereas the human mind has more than just uninterpreted symbols, it attaches meaning to the symbols.” Understanding is a function of consciousness, which is not simply a material program. Thus, if neither immortal souls nor a purely algorithmic program offers satisfactory explanations of consciousness (i.e., neither dualism nor materialism), what finally can Searle offer as an explanation?

He writes, “All forms of consciousness are caused by the behavior of neurons and are realized in the brain system, which is itself composed of neurons,” but “conscious states, with their subjective, first-person ontology, are real phenomena in the real world. We cannot do an eliminative reduction of consciousness, showing that it is just an illusion. Nor can we reduce consciousness to its neurobiological basis, because such a third-person reduction would leave out the first-person ontology of consciousness.” Despite this inhospitality to reduction, conscious states “have absolutely no life of their own, independent of neurobiology.” So how are we to reconcile this apparent paradox or contradiction? Writing in italics, Searle concludes, “*There is no reason why a physical system such as a human or animal organism should not have states that are qualitative, subjective, and intentional* [i.e., focused on something],” and then, “There are not two different metaphysical realms in your skull, one ‘physical’ and one ‘mental.’ Rather, there are just processes going on in your brain and some of them are conscious

experiences.” For good measure he adds, “There is no problem in recognizing that the mental qua mental is physical qua physical. You have to revise the traditional Cartesian definitions of both ‘mental’ and ‘physical,’ but those definitions were inadequate to the facts in any case.”

And the solution? Not very convincing, I fear, at least to an upstart outsider like me. After all of this strenuous philosophy-speak, what have we really learned? Searle calls his solution “‘biological naturalism’ . . . because it provides a naturalistic solution to the traditional ‘mind-body problem,’ one that emphasizes the biological character of mental states.” Just as H₂O molecules produce in aggregate a second-order substance of “water” whose liquidity seems to have no obvious relation to its substrate, so, Searle claims, consciousness is a subjective, first person, qualitative second order of neuronal activity, produced by but different from its generative materials. Searle keeps reminding us that absolutely everything else in the world is third person, that is, at least in theory can be witnessed. Subjective consciousness is the unique exception because of its being unobservable by anybody except the subjective first person himself. But Searle never substantively deals with what “first person” actually consists of in a third-person world, the very crux he’s been trying to demystify. The best he can do is to say that first person, or subjectivity, is “just *the state that the brain is in.*” And if it is just a brain state (whatever that means), then we have been given little more than a tautology: consciousness is first person is subjectivity is consciousness. “First person” and “subjectivity,” it appears, are little more than new names for the infamous old ghost in the machine. Can it be exorcised by anything as simple as a renaming?

Searle then turns to the problem of “free will,” reviewing some of the possible senses of that term. Human beings are “free” to make choices, in a limited sense, if they are not being constrained by outside forces (i.e., not mugged and gagged). But how constrained are choices when considered from the inside? Early on, Searle states “that all of our psychological states without exception at any given instant are entirely determined by the state of the brain at that instant,” yet he is willing to introduce a somewhat mushy term he calls “psychological freedom.” That is, while admitting the ways in which rage, hunger, etc., influence our psychological states, he finds them “not in every case causally sufficient to determine the subsequent action.” This is so vague and “metaphysical” as to appear pointless, because Searle next admits “that the neurobiology [the action of neurons] is at any instant sufficient to fix the total state of psychology [one’s mental state] at that instant.” Since Searle’s theme throughout this book is that causation is a closed material system with no intervention possible by spooks, and since he repudiates dualism’s belief in mental substances—i.e., souls—his conclusions (you would suppose) have pretty well been set by everything that comes before. But then, straight out of left field, he concludes: “We really do not know how free will exists in the brain, if it exists at all. We do not know why or how evolution

has given us the unshakeable conviction of free will. We do not know, in short, how it could possibly work.” And finally the startling summary remark: “There is still the question of whether or not we really do have freedom.”

It’s pretty astonishing that with all his analytical powers Searle should end up sounding like a religious conservative invoking the theory of intelligent design. Evolution has indeed endowed us with all sorts of characteristics that are counterproductive of both life and truth in the interests of reproduction. “Sexual selection,” Darwin’s term principally for females’ responses to male sexual attributes (see among other books Geoffrey Miller’s *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*), has evolved peacocks with immense useless tails, animals with heavy and debilitating antlers, birds with conspicuous colors, and other features and behaviors that attract females (but also predators). Many of these characteristics, mainly in males, are now regarded as fitness indicators that lure females to mate, “fitness” meaning reproductive potential rather than survivability beyond fecund copulation (leaving aside creatures that evolved to die upon mating). David Sloan Wilson’s *Darwin’s Cathedral* develops the view that religious beliefs, regardless of their irrationality and falseness, have survival value for groups and cultures: evolution is not interested in “truth” but in perpetuation of genes.

With all of the analytical clarity that pervades this book, Searle fails nonetheless to examine the very idea of free will. If the concept—and what can it mean other than unmotivated behavior?—is nonsensical and self-contradictory, to ask whether we “have it” is to ask a preposterous question. (Is the moon’s green cheese edible? Only yes or no answers will be permitted.) The pointed question is not whether we “have it” but whether it is a concept that makes any sense at all. (Would unmotivated behavior be a sign of “freedom” or dementia?) Perhaps he would have fared better had he not saved his discussion of the self until the final chapter.

“So what then is this self? I think Hume is absolutely right: there is no experience of this entity, but that does not mean that we do not have to postulate some such entity or formal principle.” As things turn out, though, the self is not really an “entity,” for then it would have to be a spook, an immaterial ghost. The self, for Searle, turns out to be pretty much the same as our everyday banal conception, a sense that there is a continuing “I” behind our consciousness. (Do we need a philosopher to tell us this?) Like the sense of free will, this sense of an “I” goes against the nature of every other substance in the known universe. There are no free-floating, nonmaterial “entities” drifting about the cosmos. Searle’s conclusion is “there is a formal or logical requirement that we postulate a self as something in addition to our experiences in order that we can make sense of the character of our experiences.” Postulating is one thing. Existing is another. Following this, Searle tells us that he is not really satisfied with these conclusions. He very well ought not to be.

As an analytic philosopher, Searle has been insufficiently analytical in his dealings with several major problems of consciousness. Had he admitted from the start that the self was purely virtual, a “self-effect,” his discussion of free will would have been more pointed and more candid: without a self, the “problem” of free will disappears. If the self is an illusion produced by the body, it has no agency at all. Nothing can come from nothing.

Though John Searle’s *Mind* is a worthwhile survey of historical positions that have been held in the West about consciousness, and though Searle is very much aware of developments in the cognitive neurosciences, richer insights can be obtained from less philosophical and more science-oriented studies, such as Daniel Wegner’s *The Illusion of Conscious Will* and Gerald Edelman’s *Wider Than the Sky: The Phenomenal Gift of Consciousness*, which are representative of an emerging stream of books. And Daniel Dennett, though a philosopher like Searle rather than a neuroscientist, makes more serious use of scientific knowledge than Searle’s ghost-haunted approach seems able to do.

