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## **THE SEARLE FALLACY: A REPLY TO JOHN BELOFF (AND IN PASSING TO JOHN SEARLE)**

Ullin T. Place

Boltby, Thirsk, North Yorkshire, YO7 2DY

### *Searle and the Mind-Brain Identity Theory*

While objecting as much as John Beloff (1995) does to John Searle's (1984; 1992) arrogant claim to have solved the mind-body problem by proposing that "mental phenomena just are features of the brain" (Searle 1984, p. 19), my objections to Searle's claim are rather different from his. Beloff seeks to undermine Searle's claim by identifying a fallacy in the argument he uses to support it. What I object to is his claim to have invented this view of the relation between mind and brain.

Although he is reluctant to describe his view as an identity theory of the mind brain relation, and criticises those who have done so, it is difficult to know what Searle is saying when he says that "mental phenomena just are features of the brain" unless he thinks that some of the phenomena which the neurologist observes on a brain scan are the very same phenomena as those which the brain's owner is simultaneously aware of by what used to be known as "introspection". As I pointed out in a previous article in this newsletter (Place 1990a), the identity theory of the mental/physical relation was first propounded by E.G. Boring in 1933 and was being vigorously advocated in the late 1950's by myself (Place 1956), Herbert Feigl (1958) and Jack Smart (1959) long before Johnny-come-lately climbed onto the bandwagon. Searle recognises that there have been others who have advocated such a view before him. He cites "J. J. C. Smart (1965),<sup>1</sup> U. T. Place (1956), and D. Armstrong (1968)", but claims that their position differs from his in that

They want to deny that there are any irreducible phenomenological properties, such as consciousness, or *qualia* (Searle, *op.cit.*, p.27),

that they are consequently unable to

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<sup>1</sup> This appears to be a misprint for "J. J. C. Smart (1959)" as no article of this date (1965) is listed in the bibliography. Nor is any publication of this date known to me to which Searle could be taken to be referring here.

concede that these properties are ordinary higher level biological properties of neurophysiological systems such as human brains (p. 28),

and that the reason for this is

that they accept the traditional Cartesian categories (p. 28).

This is a gross travesty not only of the position that I advocated in 1956 and which Smart advocated in 1959, but of that advocated by Boring in 1933 and Feigl in 1958. To suggest that we denied the existence of consciousness and *qualia* when we all specifically restricted the application of the identity theory to consciousness and its properties is absurd. We would, of course, have rejected Searle's ludicrous suggestion that consciousness is itself a phenomenological property. Properties, as Aristotle knew, cannot exist without a bearer; and consciousness, as we conceived it, is a *process*, the *bearer* of phenomenological properties, not one of them.

What Searle means by suggesting that such properties are irreducible is far from clear. What is certain is there is a serious difference between us, if it means that we can never hope to characterise the features of the brain in which mental phenomena consist in the language and concepts of neuroscience or identify the phenomena in question on neurological records of brain activity. Unless he allows that mental phenomena are reducible to neurology to that extent, Searle's claim that mental phenomena are features of brain is nothing more than empty handwaving. In order to give substance to that claim, not only must he allow the possibility of identifying a phenomenon reported by the subject on an objective record of brain activity, but every predicate that is ascribed to the mental phenomenon in the subject's report must be ascribable to the phenomenon identified on the neurological recording. For, as Leibniz has taught us, two descriptions cannot be descriptions of one and the same thing unless whatever is true of it under the one description is also true of it under the other. Leibniz's Law presents no problem to the identity theorist since, as I argued in 1956,

there is nothing that the introspecting subject says about his conscious experiences which is inconsistent with anything the physiologist might want to say about the brain processes which cause him to describe the environment and his consciousness of that environment in the way he does. (Place *op.cit.* p.50)

How, in the face of that quotation, Searle can possibly suggest that earlier versions of the theory cannot "concede that these [phenomenological] properties are ordinary higher level biological properties of

neurophysiological systems such as human brains" is beyond me. It should be equally obvious that anyone who holds that the relation between consciousness and its substrate in the brain is one of identity defined in Feigl's (1958, p. 440) words "by the . . . Leibniz principle of *identitas indiscernibilium*" could not consistently "accept the traditional Cartesian categories", since that would imply that being mental is something no physical thing could be, and that being physical is something no mental thing could be.

The only thing that gives any kind of plausibility to Searle's claim that there is a relic of Cartesianism in this earlier flowering of the identity theory is that one of the motives for Armstrong's (1968) rejection of my restriction of the identity theory to consciousness and its phenomenological properties and his extension of it so as to embrace mental dispositions as well as for Smart's (1967) acceptance of that extension was the desire to give a uniform account of all mental things and thus restore the Cartesian notion that mental has a single defining property or "essence", an element of the Cartesian story which Searle himself does not appear to repudiate. I have always believed that this extension of the identity theory to mental dispositions was a mistake, and (Place, 1967) that the relation between something's possessing a dispositional property and its basis in the structure, usually but not always, the microstructure of the property-bearer is one in which the structural features stand as cause to the disposition as effect. Searle (1983, pp. 265ff.; 1984, pp. 19-23; 1992, p. 1 and Chapter 4, note 4, pp. 251-2) agrees with me in thinking that the relation is causal, but believes, contrary to reason,<sup>2</sup> that this is not inconsistent with its also being a relation of identity.

### ***Why "the Searle fallacy" isn't a fallacy***

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<sup>2</sup> It is not just that it is inconsistent with Hume's contention that the causal relation holds between "distinct existences" which makes this a rationally unacceptable position. The causal relation and the identity relation are logically incompatible. The identity relation is reflexive (A is the same thing as itself), symmetrical (If A is the same thing as B, B is the same thing as A) and transitive (if A is the same thing as B and B is the same thing as C, A is the same thing as C). The causal relation is none of things. It is not reflexive (A cannot be the cause of itself). It is not symmetrical (If A is the cause of B, B is the effect not the cause of A). It is not properly transitive (If A directly causes B and B directly causes C, A is only an indirect cause of C). The example I have used (Place 1967; 1988) to show that a dispositional property is a distinct existence from the features of the property bearer's microstructure on which it causally depends is the example of the horsepower of an internal combustion engine which is evidently not the same thing as the cubic capacity of the cylinders on which it *inter alia* depends in a causal sense. Searle (1992, Chapter 4, note 4, pp. 251-2) counters this with the example of the property of liquidity where, he thinks, the propensity of the liquid's constituent molecules to roll over one another not only causes but constitutes the liquidity. What gives this example its plausibility is the fact that the *process* of flowing with which it is intimately connected *is* one and the same thing as the rolling of molecules over one another. But the *propensity* of the molecules to roll over one another is *not* the same thing as the propensity of the liquid to flow. For the two dispositions do not have the same property-bearer. The disposition to roll over one another is a property of the molecules. The disposition to flow is a property of the liquid.

Since, as will be evident from what I have said, I have not changed the view I expressed in 1956, it goes without saying that I agree with Searle as against Beloff in thinking that the identity theory in some shape or form - and there are many - provides the final and definitive solution to the mind-body problem. Where I agree with Beloff is in questioning the arguments which Searle puts forward in support of the theory. I cannot however, agree with Beloff that they amount to what he calls "the Searle fallacy".

A fallacy is a plausible-seeming argument whose conclusion is not supported by its premises. Now if Searle were offering us, as some contemporary philosophers such as Donald Davidson (1970/1980) have done, an *a priori* deductive argument for the conclusion "*Every mental particular is identical with some physical (brain) particular*", it is evident that the premises Beloff cites

1. *consciousness is an emergent property of brain activity*, and
  2. *no clear distinction can be drawn between mental things on the one hand and physical things on the other*
- do not entail that conclusion.

If that were Searle's argument, its invalidity is beyond question; but an invalid argument only counts as a fallacy if someone could easily be deceived into thinking that the premises support the conclusion when they do not. This is no fallacy, as no one in their right senses would find it remotely plausible.

### ***The point of Searle's arguments***

Since he is as scathing about those like myself who think that the thesis that mental phenomena are in the brain is a scientific hypothesis which stands or falls on the evidence of neuropsychology as he is about those like Davidson who thinks it can be deduced *priori* from self-evident premises, it is difficult to know what Searle thinks is the status of his claim that mental phenomena are features of the brain and what considerations, apart from the alleged inadequacies of alternative theories, are supposed to persuade us of its truth. But from his repeated insistence that consciousness is a biological phenomenon, I take it that he agrees with me in thinking that it is an empirical scientific hypothesis. If this is correct, it follows that his arguments are intended, not to demonstrate the truth of the theory, but to deflect some of the more obvious objections that have been or can be raised against the proposal to take it seriously. On this interpretation, the emergent property argument is designed to disarm those critics who claim that it is absurd to suggest, as

I did in 1956, that the phenomenal properties of conscious experiences consist in "the passage of nerve impulses over a thousand synapses" (Place 1956 p. 47). Similarly the contention that no clear distinction can be drawn between what is mental and what is not is intended to disarm those, such as Beloff, who argue that the mental and the physical are two radically different kinds of thing such that something mental could not conceivably be at the same time something physical.

### ***Beloff's argument and why it fails***

In attempting to undermine the first of these arguments, Beloff claims that

All the brain scans in the world and all the instruments a neurophysiologist could desire could not detect the peculiar properties of sense experience (Beloff, *op.cit.* p. 21)

One might equally argue that

All the chemical analyses in the world could not detect the distinctive thirst-quenching and dirt-dissolving properties of water.

In attempting to undermine Searle's second argument, Beloff appears to be suggesting (the import of what he says is not altogether clear) that Searle's examples of things that cannot be labelled either 'physical' or 'mental' ("balance of payments problems, ungrammatical sentences, reasons for being suspicious of formal logic, my ability to ski, the state government of California...etc.") can as readily be interpreted as showing that there are things that have both mental and physical aspects, rather than as showing that the distinction is not a valid one. In trying to show that the distinction *is* fundamental and irreducible, Beloff falls back on the previous argument that sensory experiences have properties which are essentially and irreducibly private.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, in relation to both of Searle's arguments, Beloff's reply is that something that is detected in one way, namely by what used to be called 'introspection', cannot be the same thing as something that is detected in another way, e.g. by a brain scan. It should be obvious that in order to support this conclusion Beloff needs a major premise to the effect that the same thing cannot be detected in two radically different

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<sup>3</sup> Searle, though he doesn't see it as grounds for thinking that the mental and physical are two radically different kinds of thing, falls in with this line of argument when he declares (Searle, 1992, p. 93) that "Conscious mental states have a special feature not possessed by other natural phenomena, namely, subjectivity." What both he and Beloff fail to appreciate is that subjectivity is just a peculiarity of the way we come to be aware of the existence of these phenomena in the first place. It is not a property of the phenomena as such.

ways. Not only is there no reason to believe that this principle is true. There are a number of examples of which the water and H<sub>2</sub>O case is only one which show it to be false.

I conclude from this that Beloff has not only failed to identify a fallacy in Searle's arguments. His own argument against the identity theory fails, not because it is invalid, but because its implicit major premise is false.

### ***My criticism of Searle's emergent properties argument***

My criticisms of Searle's arguments are rather different. In the case of the first argument I agree with him and, indeed, with Beloff in thinking that the properties of the whole cannot be reduced to the properties of the parts in the sense that one cannot substitute a *description* of the parts and their properties for a *description* of the whole and *its* properties. On the other hand, it seems to me invariably the case that the properties of the whole can be *explained* in terms of the arrangement of the parts and *their* properties, and that such explanations depend on the fact that the properties of the whole stand as effect to the arrangement of the parts and their properties as causes. As I see it, the phenomenal properties of conscious experience are no exception to this rule. The only difficulty is that in this case the precise brain processes which make up conscious experience have yet to be identified. Consequently neuropsychologists are not yet in a position to explain the properties of those experiences as described by the subject in terms of the neural microprocesses in which the experiences as a whole consist and on whose arrangement and properties their phenomenal properties depend. But there is no reason to suppose that when these microprocesses have been identified, an explanation of the phenomenal properties of experience will not be forthcoming.

My objection to Searle's position on this issue is that he gives too much away to those such as Tom Nagel (1974) and Colin McGinn (1991) who argue that conscious experience and its phenomenological properties are an ultimate mystery for which no scientific explanation will ever be forthcoming. For Searle private experience is a biological phenomenon, but one whose properties are emergent, not just in the sense that one cannot substitute a description of the properties and arrangement of its parts for a description of the properties of the whole, but, it would seem, in some obscure sense which makes them "irreducible" to any known property of brain activity or any that could conceivably be discovered in the future.

This defeatism in relation to the challenge to account for the phenomenal properties of experience is due, I believe, not only to the current lack of a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of consciousness itself, but also to an unreasonable demand that such an explanation account not just for the description that the subject gives of what it is like to have a particular experience, but for what cannot be put into words the "raw feel" (Tolman 1932), the very texture of the experience itself which is known only to the person whose experience it is.

The source of this wholly unreasonable demand, I suggest, is the paradoxical discrepancy between, on the one hand, the richness of our conscious experience, the intimacy of our acquaintance with it and the fact that as far as we as individuals are concerned nothing exists without it, and, on the other hand, our almost total inability to say anything coherent about it that is intelligible to another person. The source of this discrepancy lies in our language, in the fact to which Wittgenstein (1953, I 242ff) draws attention in his so-called "private language argument" that if what we say is to be intelligible to another, our words have to be anchored to what is simultaneously and unambiguously observable by both of us. That is why the only way we have of characterising a private conscious experience so that what we say is intelligible to another, is in terms of what have been called its "publicly observable concomitants" in the typical case, both on the stimulus or input side and on the response or output side. That is why all we can do by way of describing such an experience is to compare it either to the kind of experience which typically occurs when such and such a situation is impinging on our senses or to the kind of experience which makes us want to behave in this or that publicly identifiable way. That too is why, as I remarked in passage from the 1956 paper already quoted, there is nothing that the introspecting subject can say about her experience that could conflict with anything the neuroscientist might say about the brain process in which, on this view, it consists.

### *My criticism of Searle's mental/physical distinction argument*

I have a more serious disagreement with the other argument which Beloff quotes from Searle, his claim that there is no fundamental distinction of category or kind between the mental and the physical. We have seen that if you hold, as both Searle and I do, that mental phenomena are in the brain, you cannot consistently hold, on pain of infringing Leibniz's Law, that the mental and the physical are fundamentally different

categories or kinds of thing such that whatever is mental cannot also be physical and *vice versa*. It follows that I am as anxious as he is to prove that the mental/physical distinction is not one of category. Where we differ is in the strategies we adopt in the attempt to do this. Searle's strategy is to rubbish the whole enterprise of trying to identify the fundamental categories or kinds of thing which are embedded in our language. This is consistent with his riding roughshod over what, to a categorialist like myself, is the important distinction between process and property in the passage quoted above. My strategy is to accept the legitimacy of the project and show that the mental and the physical are not among the fundamental categories that we find when the attempt is made to identify them.

In support of this claim, I cannot do better than quote from an article (Place 1995) which I contributed to the Proceedings of Conference on 'Consciousness at the crossroads of philosophy and cognitive science' held at Maribor, Slovenia in August 1994:

The term 'category' comes from Aristotle and is used by him to refer to the units in a taxonomy of fundamental kinds of thing which, he thinks, our language compels us to distinguish, and which he sets out not only in the treatise known as the *Categories*, but also with minor differences in the *Topics*<sup>4</sup> and the *Posterior Analytics*.<sup>5</sup> The best way to understand what a category is for Aristotle is to consider the process of definition *per genus et differentiam* known to the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages as the "Tree of Porphyry." In this procedure a lower-level universal is defined by specifying the superordinate universal or kind under which it falls together with the feature that differentiates it from other kinds at the same level in the hierarchy. By applying this procedure at each successive level of generality one eventually arrives at a point where it no longer makes sense to ask the question 'And what kind of thing is that?' When this point is reached we know that we have arrived at what Aristotle calls 'a category.' Aristotle's list of categories is no longer acceptable, not only because of the inconsistencies between his three lists, but, more important, because it relies heavily on the now outmoded subject-and-predicate analysis of sentences with its inability to handle relations and such grammatical phenomena as the active-passive transformation. In the last few years, the writer (Place 1993, forthcoming-a) has been attempting to develop a more adequate taxonomy of ontological categories based on a version (Place 1990b, 1992, forthcoming-b) of Wittgenstein's (1921/1961) "picture theory" of the meaning of sentences in natural language using Frege's (1891/1960) function and argument analysis of the sentence and Barwise and Perry's (1983) concept of "a situation" as that which a sentence depicts.

This ontology subdivides situations into *events* whereby a change occurs in the properties of and/or relations between concrete particulars (Aristotle's "substances") and *states of affairs* whereby they persist unchanged over a period of time. Events or "occurrences" as Ryle calls them are then further sub-divided into *processes* in which the change is continuous over a period of time and instantaneous events (starts and stops) which occur at moments of time, but are not extended over time. This sub-classification of situations ... is ... the basis for the belief to which I subscribed then [i.e., in 1956], as I still do, that the philosopher's search for the essence that distinguishes the

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<sup>4</sup> 103<sup>b</sup>23.

<sup>5</sup> 83<sup>b</sup>15.



mental from the physical is looking for a will o' the wisp. With the doubtful exception of Aristotle's category of substance (ο\_σία) which, unless you accept Descartes' argument, has no obvious mental instance except possibly the brain, *all the important distinctions of category are to be found on both sides of that divide.* [Italics inserted here]

### *The "evidence" of parapsychology*

In a concluding section of his paper Beloff suggests that one lesson to be learned from his exposure of the Searle fallacy is that it should draw our attention to the evidence of parapsychology which Searle ignores and which as Beloff puts it

by definition cannot be explained in terms of any known brain function (p.24)

Since I have always maintained that the thesis that consciousness is some yet to be specified brain process is a scientific hypothesis which will stand or fall, once the brain process in question has been identified, on the empirical evidence, I owe an explanation as to why I have invariably assumed that the relevant evidence would have to be neuropsychological evidence of a correlation between the conscious experience reported and described by the subject and an aspect of brain activity recorded by some kind of brain scan. That of course, is the kind of evidence needed to *confirm* the hypothesis. But what about the evidence from parapsychology considered as evidence *against it*. Should that not be given equal weight? I think not and for two reasons.

In the first place if we consider the alleged phenomena covered by the term 'extra-sensory perception' (ESP), phenomena such as telepathy, precognition and psychokinesis, it becomes apparent that such phenomena, if they were proved genuine, would be no easier to explain on a dualist (or trialist) theory of the mind-brain relation than on a materialist-monist theory. The problem with such phenomena is not that they are inconsistent with our current theories of how the brain works, it is that to accept their reality would commit us to the existence of causal relations of a kind which are not permitted by the laws of physics as we currently construe them. Of course, if it could be demonstrated that the mental and the physical are two fundamentally different categories of thing, it could be plausibly argued that the laws that apply in the mental domain are quite different from those that apply in the physical. But, as we have already seen, the mental/physical distinction in so far as *any* coherent distinction can be drawn between the two is not a distinction between two fundamentally different categories of thing.

In any case, if the laws governing the mental domain are so different, why are our extra-sensory perceptual abilities so unreliable? How come that those who lay claim to such abilities appear no better at predicting the result of events, such as the outcome of the National Lottery, than the rest of us? One would have thought that if such an ability really existed, so great is the adaptive advantage it would give its possessor that natural selection would have ensured not only the survival of those with the relevant genes at the expense of those without them, but the refinement of such abilities to the point where they became a reliable and effective basis for action. But nothing of the kind has happened.

My second point in this connection is that the kind of parapsychological evidence which, if it existed, *would* seriously undermine the mind-brain identity hypothesis would be evidence of the persistence of conscious experience after all activity has ceased in its owner's brain. As far as I am aware, the only evidence that is at all impressive which lends itself to interpretation in this sense is the anecdotal evidence suggesting the existence in certain cases of the ability to genuinely remember the experiences of persons long dead. Such cases, if proved genuine, would not show that either the conscious experiences of the dead person when alive or those of the person now recollecting those experiences did not consist in activity within their respective brains. What it would require, however, is that the synaptic weight changes brought about in the dead person's brain by experiences undergone during their lifetime be somehow transferred to the brain of a person now living. Admittedly it is extremely difficult to envisage how such a transfer of synaptic weights between one brain and another could come about, particularly when the lives of the two brains are widely separated in time and space. But notice (a) that there is no need to postulate the occurrence of conscious experience in such cases in the absence of the relevant brain activity and (b) that, as in the ESP cases, what is at issue is an apparent suspension of the laws of physics rather than a suspension of the principles of neuropsychology.

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