Biological naturalism[1]

THE THEORY

Biological naturalism, the theory of mind developed by John Searle (*The Rediscovery of the Mind*), has at its heart a theory about consciousness. An investigation into consciousness should perhaps start with a distinction between 'creature consciousness' and 'state consciousness'. Some types of creatures, such as human beings, have consciousness, some, such as plants, do not. Searle argues the mind is consciousness, and a conscious mental state is simply a matter of the subject being conscious of something. Consciousness is a 'field', conscious states are the 'flux', modifications in the field.

Some philosophers have a different explanation of consciousness. We shouldn't start with 'consciousness' per se, as Searle does. Instead, we can say that a creature is conscious if it has conscious mental states. We then only need to say what makes a mental state conscious, e.g. a mental state is conscious if the creature is conscious of it, and this means that the creature has a higher-order thought about the state. This functional analysis makes consciousness completely reducible to the ways in which mental states interact. But functionalism famously faces the objection that what pain feels like, what red looks like, can't be reduced to some relationship between mental states. A computer that replicated the relationships between mental states wouldn't thereby be conscious, feeling pain for instance. Consciousness is not reducible to a function.

Searle agrees with this objection. He argues that consciousness is irreducibly 'first-personal'; its reality, its phenomena exist from the first-personal perspective – that is, it is 'subjective', only visible from 'inside'. Thoughts and feelings – as thoughts and feelings – are available to the subject only. A functional analysis is 'third-personal' – it describes conscious states from the 'outside' (how they interact), not in terms of how they are like from the subject's point of view.

So if the mind is consciousness, and we can't say what this is by functional analysis, then what is consciousness? Searle argues that it is a biological phenomenon, a property of the brain, but not a purely functional property. Instead, it is a 'systemic' property.

Systemic properties are very common in science, and some can seem quite unexpected just looking at the parts of the 'system'. For example, water is liquid, even though none of its parts, its molecules, are liquid. Liquidity is a systemic property. But we can explain why water is liquid in terms of its parts and their causal interactions. Another example is transparency – molecules aren't transparent; what makes glass transparent is the way the molecules are organized.

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2009) *Philosophy for A2: Unit 3* (London: Routledge), Ch. 1, pp. 51-3, 57

In each of these cases, we can explain the 'new' systemic property in terms of micro-level interactions.

Similarly, Searle argues, consciousness is a systemic property of the brain. It is the brain as a whole that is conscious, even though its individual parts – neurones – aren't. Consciousness is caused by micro-level brain processes, and if the brain and its causal powers and processes were reproduced, so would consciousness be. So, Searle says, there is nothing particularly mysterious about consciousness – it is part of the natural world, in particular, biology.

OBJECTIONS

But there seems to be a very important difference between systemic properties like liquidity and transparency, and consciousness. We can give complete scientific explanations for why liquids are liquid, why glass is transparent. In other words, we can 'reduce' these properties to what explains them – the behaviour of molecules. But Searle himself seems to provide a very good reason why we can't do this with consciousness: consciousness is irreducibly first-personal, but the activities of neurones are third-personal. Neuroscientists can see neurones and measure their activity in a way in which they cannot see or experience someone's thoughts. And so some philosophers argue that if the phenomena of consciousness are irreducibly first-personal, then properties of consciousness are not physical. Consciousness is not like other biological properties, because it cannot be explained in third-personal terms.

Searle rejects this argument. We could, if we wanted to, insist on redefining the facts of consciousness in physical terms, just as we have redefined liquidity in molecular terms. We could, but we don't, because then we leave out what we are really interested in, viz. the first-personal conscious experiences themselves. However, this doesn't show that consciousness is something non-physical. We have explained how consciousness can be a higher-order property of a working brain. This shows that we are not talking about two different things when we talk about brain processes and consciousness. The irreducibility of consciousness is purely pragmatic, a matter of what our interest in consciousness is. It doesn't have any metaphysical implications.

The objection can be pressed, though. With liquidity, our explanation of why something is liquid also shows why it must be liquid (given the properties of the molecules and the laws of nature). But we don't have any kind of explanation of why, given the properties of the brain and the laws of nature, we must end up with consciousness.

Searle accepts this, but makes two points in reply. First, it is possible that as neuroscience develops, we will get such an explanation. But this seems to side-step the issue of how an explanation in third-personal terms can ever be an adequate explanation of something first-personal. Second, the fact that we can't say that the brain must give rise to consciousness isn't a problem. Science often tells us why things are the way they are without showing us that they have to be that way, e.g. evolutionary explanations.

Is biological naturalism a form of property dualism?

Searle's biological naturalism argues for the reduction of the causal powers of mental properties to those of physical properties. However, he argues that mental properties are unique, quite distinct from physical properties, because they are related to the first-personal point of view. In this sense, consciousness is irreducible. Other philosophers who make the same point have argued that, because mental properties are ineradicably subjective, while scientific explanations are always objective, we cannot give a complete scientific explanation of the world. We have to mention mental properties in addition, and separately.

Searle, however, denies that the subjectivity of mental properties has any metaphysical consequences. The irreducibility of mental properties is more an epistemological fact than a metaphysical one. Once we understand how our explanations are guided by particular interests we have in what we wish to explain, we will not conclude that the inability of science to explain consciousness implies anything strange about the world. Consciousness, he argues, is a systemic biological property, and there are, in science, many example of this kind of property. Therefore, he denies that biological naturalism is a form of property dualism.

However, we can object that this underplays the difference between consciousness and other systemic, biological properties: consciousness is unique in having subjectivity. If we can argue that this fact is not merely epistemological, but metaphysical, then Searle is wrong, and his theory is a form of property dualism.