

Searle and Property Dualism

In this paper, I will outline Searle's response to claims that tie him to Property Dualism. This response comes by way of his article '*Why I Am Not a Property Dualist*'. I will first give Searle's account of Property Dualism and the troubling implications this account holds. I will then outline Searle's own theory of mind, Biological Naturalism. After outlining his theory I will show that if you accept the three fundamental tenets of Biological Naturalism, Searle will be able to avoid the pitfalls of Property Dualism and thus detach himself from the theory.

Searle's account of Property Dualism is as follows: Mental phenomena¹ and physical phenomena exist in two mutually exclusive metaphysical categories. The mental is subjective in the sense that it only exists as experience by humans or animals. Consciousness depends on our experience of it in order to exist. However the physical is objective, in that its existence is independent of our experience of it. The material world exists even if there is no human or animal experiencing it. Mental states are also not reducible to physical states. They are something "distinct from and over and above" (59) physical states such as brain processes. By the mental being irreducible to the physical, it sufficiently suggests that it is something completely apart from the physical. However, the mental and physical are not necessarily separate objects or substances. They are features or properties of one in the same thing, the human or the animal. Besides an object having the properties of shape, color, and size, it could also have some mental property. So any conscious thing will have both mental and physical properties.

A very problematic question arises from this account of Property Dualism: How do mental phenomena function causally? The answer to this question is two-pronged, and both lead to an undesirable situation: First, if we assume that the physical universe is causally closed (which is the more rational), then the mental must be epiphenomenal. This means that if something is to affect a physical object, it also must be physical in nature. If, according to Property Dualists, mental phenomena are not physical in nature, then they

¹ Please allow me to use 'mental phenomena', 'consciousness' and 'the mental' to refer to the 1st person states of awareness that begin in the morning after a dreamless sleep and continue until you fall back into a dreamless sleep

are causally impotent in regards to the physical, or they are epiphenomenal. Something with no energy or mass cannot act on something with energy or mass according to conservation of matter.

The second option is to say that the physical universe is not causally closed. However that results in the problem of causal overdetermination. In this perspective, if I raise my arm we can account for it with physical causes, certain complicated brain processes. We can also account for the raising of my arm by way of our conscious decision to do so. So, in this second option, we have two distinct, irreducible causes for one action. Searle simply puts it: “my bodily movements have too many causes.” (59)

Searle attempts to sketch Biological Naturalism in a way that avoids this pitfall, and thus separate his theory from Property Dualism. He lays out three basic tenets for his theory: 1) “There are not two (or five or seven) fundamental ontological categories.” (59) We live in one world and attempting to divide it up into many fundamental ontological categories is fruitless. This mistake is most prevalent in Cartesian terminology which categorizes the mind and the body as two opposing and incompatible substances: the mind is subjective and non-physical and the body is objective and physical². Searle argues that we should use one category which is subjective, objective and physical. The original categories were created at a time when science agreed with the possibility of non-physical phenomena. With the advent of new sciences, which tell us that those non-physical phenomena are not possible, we should get rid of stale terminology. However the resulting single category does not prevent us from recognizing that there are still different systems and features of the world that stand out apart from one another. One observable system is Biology and a feature of this system is consciousness. Consciousness is, in a sense, a biological process, and it reacts with other biological processes such as digestion, and rehydration, and one can rationally say that these processes are features of biology.

2) Consciousness is causally reducible to brain processes but not ontologically reducible to them. Consciousness is causally reducible because all the features of consciousness can be causally explained by the neurobiological processes of the brain. Each thought I have can be explained by some system of neuron firings, and consciousness has no causal ability apart from these firings. Raising my arm might be a

² This is a simplified representation of the Cartesian mind-body distinction, and will suffice for the scope of his paper

conscious decision, but, at the same time, it is a neurobiological process that sets off a complicated causal chain. However, from this, it does not follow that consciousness is nothing but neuron firings. Since consciousness is subjective, you cannot wholly reduce its existence to an objective set of events. By doing so, you would lose its first person subjective existence, or ontology. If we reduce seeing color to just a certain configuration of neuron firings, we would shave off a whole set of subjective features. We cannot get rid of these features because we know that they do really exist by the fact that we have experiences of them.

3) Consciousness is a biological feature and therefore physical feature of the brain. It is not something over and above these physical events. Consciousness is a state that the brain is in. This state is similar to the states water can be in. It can be in a liquid, gaseous, or solid state depending on the arrangement of its molecules. Mental phenomena function causally in the same way ice functions causally. Ice is water in a solid state just like consciousness is the brain in a certain neurobiological state. The solidity of ice is part of the causal structure of the universe, it allows us to cool our drinks, and skate on our rivers, even though it is completely reducible to the hexagonal structure of H₂O molecules. Similarly, consciousness lets us perform a multitude of causal functions even though it can be wholly reduced to brain states.

If we again ask the question: How do mental phenomena function causally? We can assume that the world is causally closed, and no problem arises for Searle. If mental phenomena are physical in nature then they can function causally (3). If Consciousness has no causal power in addition to its neurobiological processes then it can be causally reduced to the brain (2). If a subjective conscious state can be causally reduced to something objective and physical, then we have no more need for the Cartesian mind-body categories (1). If we accept these tenets, then it follows that the problems which plague Property Dualism cannot apply to Biological Naturalism, and by this we show that they are not the same theory.

In this paper I have attempted to show that Searle's article, *'Why I Am Not a Property Dualist'*, is an adequate rebuttal to the charge that he is a property dualist.