



Mind: A Brief Introduction

John Rogers Searle

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"The philosophy of mind is unique among contemporary philosophical subjects," writes John Searle, "in that all of the most famous and influential theories are false." One of the world's most eminent thinkers, Searle dismantles these theories as he presents a vividly written, comprehensive introduction to the mind. He begins with a look at the twelve problems of philosophy of mind--which he calls "Descartes and Other Disasters"--problems which he returns to throughout the volume, as he illuminates such topics as materialism, consciousness, the mind-body problem, intentionality, mental causation, free will, and the self. The book offers a refreshingly direct and engaging introduction to one of the most intriguing areas of philosophy.

Mind: A Brief Introduction Details

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From Reader Review *Mind*: A Brief Introduction for online ebook

Bruce says

Full disclosure before beginning this review of John Searle's *Mind*. Outside of speculative fiction and impressive displays of raw logic, I'm not a big fan of philosophy, far preferring empirically-based observation. I like to tell myself that I'm comfortable with the unknown. Got a way to discover something? Great! You do it (or at least describe it so others can do it). Just don't come yammering your certainties at me based exclusively on your own navel gazing. For me, faith is a pasttime, not a means of ordering my world.

So why, then, bother to read a book on the philosophy of mind? Well, I do enjoy books which promise to reveal the answers at the back so-to-speak, and this one promised to deliver by recapping the evolution of thought on thought... and the last chapter was supposed to synopsise the state of the art of cognitive neuroscience, so hey, not too shabby. Searle is an extremely elegant writer, who takes extreme care to avoid obfuscating academic mumbo-jumbo and jargon. For example, at page 84, he debunks attempts to dismiss subjectivity as a superficial by-product of organic brain activity with, "There are lots of concepts where the surface features of the phenomena are more interesting than the microstructure. Consider mud or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Mud behavior is molecular behavior but that is not the interesting thing about mud, so few people are anxious to insist: 'Mud can be reduced to molecular behavior,' though they could if they really wanted to. Similarly with Beethoven.... The music critic who writes, 'All I could hear were wave motions,' has missed the point of the performance." (On that note, what makes going to a performance of Beethoven's Ninth like listening to the ocean? All you can hear are... oh, never mind.) Seriously, Searle can really be a delight to read, and he in fact does deliver on the book's promise to trace (and then debunk) theories of consciousness from Rene Descartes' mind/body dualism to David Chalmers' avowed belief in the existence of a conscious thermostat (cited on p. 104). Personally, I prefer Philip K. Dick's proposition of a pair of happy brown oxford shoes, but hey, to each his own.

As Searle defines it, intangibility is the problem of consciousness that has so troubled philosophers through the ages. Pain is intangible. Our perception of color is intangible. My desire to enjoy an oreo-chip hot fudge sundae while nattering on about the way the brain works is intangible (but, I hope, widely-shared nonetheless). While Searle does walk the reader through the various attempts to solve this problem (in the process almost making me care about it), I was immensely disappointed when it came time for him to offer his own solution. I mean here's a self-described philosopher who professes, "It is a logical possibility, though I think extremely unlikely, that when our bodies are destroyed, our souls will go marching on. I have not tried to show that this is an impossibility (indeed, I wish it were true), but rather that it is inconsistent with just about everything else we know about how the universe works and therefore it is irrational to believe in it." (p. 92) That pretty much sums up my world view right there.

The problem I have is that Searle moves from this rigorous statement of rationality to one which throws the whole argument out the window. Recall my Searle quote about Beethoven and mud two paragraphs up. Well, it turns out that's the crux of the matter. Searle asserts that consciousness is a nonsuperficial neurobiological by-product. It's just what happens when the nervous system works properly. Sure we don't know why that is, but so what? Just accept it. Don't get me wrong. I agree with this position. It's essentially what I came to this book believing anyway. However, it completely takes the wind out of a book's sails to take great lengths to analyze a concept only to dismiss it out of hand as superfluous and be done with it. I mean, why bother at all?

Searle goes on to tackle free will (sort of, he concludes "We really do not know how free will exists in the

brain, if it exists at all," at p. 164); how it is that our sense of self can survive unconsciousness (uh, Searle? It's called 'memory,' you can look it up); and the problem of perception (a bubble he bursts on p. 181 with "I think the argument most likely to convince most people in the history of [the subject of how it is that we can see our hand waving in front of our face:] is the argument from science. But in the history of philosophy the argument that has been more influential among philosophers is called the argument from illusion.") Searle goes on of course from here at length with the argument from illusion, but at this point, I'm wholly in the camp of the "most people." I simply couldn't care less.

Why does Searle?

Chris Ziesler says

Searle's book provides an excellent overview to both the history of the philosophy of mind and the current state of understanding of this important area. His primary concern is the philosophical but he never shies away from describing how our philosophical understanding of the mind has to be aligned with and informed by neurobiological understanding and research.

What I found most refreshing about Searle's approach was his ability to ground his arguments in everyday experience and common sense. He systematically works his way through a sequence of thorny philosophical topics: the mind-body problem; consciousness; causality; free-will; perception; and provides a sound and well-argued framework to understand why these issues have caused such deep debate between philosophers over the years and the gives his own view as to the best resolution.

He is completely candid about where the limits of our current knowledge are and which problems will benefit from more scientific research and which problems need better philosophical research.

I found that in the sections dealing with specifically philosophical arguments, for example the section on Intentionality-with-a-t compared with Intensionality-with-an-s, the philosophical vocabulary made the material dense and opaque, but Searle brings back the topic to concrete examples wherever he can which found helpful.

One aspect of the book that I found a little disappointing was that Searle only touched very lightly on Artificial Intelligence and the possibility of machine-learning and consciousness. Given that he has been so involved in that debate - see The Chinese Room thought-experiment - I had hoped that he might have included more discussion of this important current topic.

Overall, I very much appreciated his style which mixed a comprehensive knowledge of the subject with humor and insight.

David Withun says

While this book was not what I expected nor what the title seems to advertise, I was pleasantly surprised and immensely enjoyed reading it. Based upon the title (and no additional research), I assumed that this book would indeed be by "a brief introduction" to the philosophy of mind. I expected something like a "Philosophy of

"Mind for Dummies" approach as is typical of such books and set out to introduce myself to the topic. Within the first chapter, however, I encountered the lament of the author that he is not able to simply inform his students and readers of the truth (as he sees it, though he wouldn't acknowledge that point) but instead must tell them about the other opinions and the history of those opinions. Any introduction that starts that way is no longer an introduction. That said, Searle does, in a sense, and certainly with a great deal of bias, introduce us to many of the most important issues in the philosophy of mind. He does so, of course, in a way that will lead us to his own opinion and, he hopes, convince us of it, but he does introduce nonetheless.

Having said all of that, I do think that Searle's approach is a very interesting one that is perhaps one of the best (that is, one with the fewest problems) approaches within philosophy of mind today. He seeks to overcome the historical categories and diametric opposites such as "dualism" and "materialism" and instead posit a sort of "third way" which he views as the common sense approach in between the two extremes. While this is clever and, as I've already said, leads us out of many of the problems of dualism and materialism, I think that it also brings his ideas into an area which suffers from many of the same problems as dualism and materialism. That is, while avoiding certain problems of each philosophy, he has taken on certain problems from both.

Overall, this book is an excellent and very readable read (which is saying a lot for a book on the philosophy of mind; "readable" is rarely an apt description for works on such a subject). I recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about the philosophy of mind and especially anyone who wasn't lost the child's ability to question things that everyone else just takes for granted.

Kyle van Oosterum says

"Philosophy begins with a mystery and wonder at what any sane person regards as too obvious to worry about." - John R. Searle.

An extremely compelling introduction to consciousness, perception, causation and personal identity. Full to the brim with whimsical thought experiments - the zombie, 'what is it like to be a bat?', the brain in a vat - one really begins to understand the problems that plague the Philosophy of Mind.

Gary Bruff says

This concise work by an important philosopher of language provides a somewhat intriguing but ultimately wrong-headed if not outright dangerous approach to the phenomena of language and cognition. There are many category errors in MIND: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION. I will mention only two.

First of all, Searle shares with Chomsky and with most mainstream linguists a certain dogmatic belief. Roughly, this belief is that language is for thinking, and any other reflexes that are enabled by the minds of us rational animals (society, art, religion, economics, law, auto repair, intimacy, family, whatever) are secondary, maybe even wholly derivative and epiphenomenal, to the real purpose, telos, and function of the MIND, which is to stand at the professor's podium and say stuff that sounds good and rational. To suggest that a culture that is expressed by mind(s) and a society that hangs together by mind(s) are solely unintended consequences of the human brain is to admit a clear lack of understanding of humanity's essentially collective and shared existence. We speak because we think, yes, but we more significantly speak because

there is someone to talk to.

Let that segue to my other point. To treat the mind as a fundamentally autonomous system that controls through our egocentric intentions our other systems ('I want to raise my arm, so I do' is the irrelevant example he continues to return to), or to see the intent of the individual as basic to the mind's functioning, is to reduce the person to a machine, an automaton, a thing. We now know the un-dividable individual is an abstraction of the Bourgeois era, a hyperbolic gesture to the man who is an island, and not anything that can provide the basis for a theory of human nature and cognitive primacy, raising arms or not.

If you are interested in the philosophy of language or in logic and pragmatics, don't read this book. If you have any knowledge of hermeneutics or phenomenology, then don't read this book. If you think the social is in many ways the telos of the cognitive, don't read this book. But if you want to learn more about how the mind works, then please, don't read this book.

Pishowi says

While this book was not what I expected nor what the title seems to advertise, I was pleasantly surprised and immensely enjoyed reading it. Based upon the title (and no additional research), I assumed that this book would indeed be by "a brief introduction" to the philosophy of mind. I expected something like a "Philosophy of Mind for Dummies" approach as is typical of such books and set out to introduce myself to the topic. Within the first chapter, however, I encountered the lament of the author that he is not able to simply inform his students and readers of the truth (as he sees it, though he wouldn't acknowledge that point) but instead must tell them about the other opinions and the history of those opinions. Any introduction that starts that way is no longer an introduction. That said, Searle does, in a sense, and certainly with a great deal of bias, introduce us to many of the most important issues in the philosophy of mind. He does so, of course, in a way that will lead us to his own opinion and, he hopes, convince us of it, but he does introduce nonetheless.

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Greg says

The question of the mind is a convoluted mess. Until recently I'd not given too much thought to the whole mind/body question, it's one of those questions that continental philosophy just doesn't give too much

attention to. There are intersubjective questions like *The Other*, and that gets played out quite a bit, but to get into the real logical / science of it all is just something left to those unsexy analytical eggheads.

The ridiculousness of the question is that it's based on a bunch of assumptions that have been fought over to logical death for the past few hundred years, and no one outside of philosophers really give a shit about the question. Just take the perception part of the mind problem, there are a great many philosophers, really smart men (I don't know of any women who said these things), who believe we don't see the world, but only some sense of the world, that may or may not be an accurate representation of the world, that may or may not even be there, but could be, or could just be an idea in our minds, based on the fact that when we look at a coin at different angles the shape can change from being a circle to being elliptical, and that a table can look differently depending on if you are on one side, or crouch down at eye-level with it, or standing above it. Because these things look different it means that we don't see the thing it-self, but only some kind of impression of it, that is only our perception and not the thing-it-self (roughly). A five year old has the cognitive ability to realize that changing ones point of view makes something look different but doesn't change the thing, and that it is impossible to see *anything* from all sides and perspectives at once.

When you read grown men arguing about this stuff, and proving that this means something, one wonders why half of the philosophical world just threw their hands up, called an end to philosophy and went literary with no regard for the logic that can make otherwise intelligent people seriously believe things like this.

One can blame Descartes for all of this, and then Hume who brought a certain logical paradox between a person and their relationship to the world that got taken as being a true psychological or mental state instead of being a problem (even though Hume probably thought he was right and was describing the mind as it was, or maybe not, I don't know).

Searle's book is an attempt to clear out all of the bullshit that the questions of the mind have resulted in to, and give his own interpretation of the problem and it's solution. He does a nice job of clearing away the rubble of centuries of misguided formulations of the problems, and shoots lots of holes in contemporary attempts to solve the nature of the mind problem, but I have no idea if his solution is any better. This isn't the kind of book where he goes into enough detail for me to know that.

Instead of the title the book has, it should be called, *Mind: A Brief Introduction to John Searle's Take on the Mind*, not that this is a problem, it's just not shall I say an unbiased look at the mind problem.

From my own opinions and knowledge, I think that Searle might be partly right about the mind problem, but I think that there is something missing in his view, and maybe in his other works he gives a clearer explanation, or a more detailed description of what he actually thinks.

I, of course, have my own unfounded opinion about the solution to problems brought up in this book, but I have no proof, and I'm sure other people have thought of my ideas first, and I'm just going to keep it to myself for now, because it's much more fun playing with the logic in my head and trying to figure out how to put it into words at this point.

One thing that I think is missing in this book is any real focus on memory. It's brought up from time to time, but a few of the topics could have been expanded further by going into what Searle thinks memory is. The only time he really uses memory is in the chapter about the self, where I found it problematic. Is memory really a necessary condition to our knowledge of our self? Don't other people have a say in our conception of believing ourselves to be a self? I'm thinking of an extreme example, but recently I saw a documentary about a guy who just suddenly lost all memory of who he was, and he filmed himself on his quest to find out who

he was. Is this man a new person? A different self? What about the people who knew him before, do they see him as the same person? There are problems that arise in this documentary that don't seem adequately covered in criteria of 'self-hood' that Searle plays with.

A second problem was in his distinction of conscious and unconscious states. He dismisses the unconscious, which could be ok, but puts certain things that one would say are unconscious in a non-conscious part of the mind, such as breathing and natural functions that happen regardless of what we are thinking about. This is fine, but the line he draws is too cut and dry since ones consciousness can move into the non-conscious part of the mind with the right focus, or training or whatever you want to call it. Think Buddhist monks that can cause radical shifts in their body through meditation, bringing their pulse and breathing down to really low levels, or if you don't like the Eastern kind of example, then how about military trained snipers, who learn to control their body to get a better shot in between heartbeats and breathing? The point of these two examples is that the functions of the mind that Searle designates as non-conscious can in fact be consciously controlled in the right situations, which in the scope of the chapter in this book, means that the realm of consciousness is possibly farther reaching, or at least more dynamic than he is acknowledging. Which means (I think) that there is a more complex system at work than the simplified duality he posits (which one could draw an analogy to being similar to the mind/body duality he is (I think) successfully arguing against in the first half of the book. It's almost as if when we enter into the realm where science hasn't quite gotten the whole story on what is happening that Searle is reverting to the phantoms of either/or thinking that limit problem in such a way that the entire premise, or assumptions could be faulty.

I'm kind of rambling, I started this review feeling awake, and now I'm feeling like sleeping. I apologize if some of the last two paragraphs make no sense. I'll probably try to clarify some of what I'm thinking in my blog in the near future.

Andrew says

When I read John Searle-- unlike many of the other analytic philosophers-- I get the feeling I'm dealing not with a specialist, but with a broad-ranging and fierce intellect. That being said, he faces what I feel to be the number one problem facing modern analytic philosophy-- a lot of it seems to be a very pointless language game, relying more on misapprehension of definition than anything else.

That being said, it is a very good primer on philosophy of mind, and I really do feel that Searle's Chinese room concept is a very valuable concept. It's just not ideal. I'm still curious to hear more of the man's ideas.

Robert Fischer says

I thought a lot about whether to give this book four or five stars. Ultimately, I am giving it five stars because although the book is superb, it's a strangely written little book. Purportedly, John R. Searle set out to write an "intro to" text on the philosophy of the mind, and this book is that "intro to". Yet the text is not really for a new-comer to the field of cognitive science or philosophy of the mind — although I disagree with pretty much every conclusion and method in the text, I'd suggest *Consciousness Explained* as a better book for a new-comer. You probably also want to pick up *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* or *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* to get a good handle on the cognitive science and some of the complexities of the mind's structure. Once you have those books under your belt, this is a

Jakob says

This book is John Searle's attempt at giving a brief overview of what he sees as the most pressing questions in the philosophy of mind.

The most central issue of them all is to give an account of the nature of consciousness and how it fits into what we know about the world. For Searle, the two most influential ways of answering this problem—dualism and materialism—do not hold water.

When it comes to dualism, it's simply not very coherent. It supposes that mind and body are different things altogether, consisting of different types of substance or in different realms if you will. It's hard to find any satisfying account of how these separate realms are able to intersect causally, and it does not jive very well with what we know from modern science: everything points to consciousness being quite inseparable from the physical body—the soul can be altered by surgery, chemicals, a lack of oxygen, or any other influence upon the physical brain.

Various forms of materialism, on the other hand, are more fashionable these days, especially among the scientifically minded. There are so many flavors in this group, but the basic premise underlying them is that the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force, and nothing over and above this. The mind, being a part of our world, must therefore also be entirely explainable in these physical terms. So far, so good, right? The problem for Searle is the extent that these views tend to end up in reductionism. Everything is ultimately to be reduced to the lowest level of explanation, and these explanations take the form of third-person ontology. However, it seems quite vividly to us that our consciousness has certain subjective qualities, experiences that have a first-person ontology: there is a certain feel to my experience of the color red right now, for instance. The answer of many radical materialists is to in some way or another explain away this phenomena, often suggesting that it is an illusion. One famous example of this thinking taken to its extreme, and by now the butt of several jokes, is behaviorism. The behaviorists had the idea that the postulation of a mind couldn't be studied at all, and hence it must be disposed of—all there really is, is behavior. In that vein, some philosophers have suggested that consciousness isn't something that really exists, only something we postulate out of convenience for explaining behavior. Searle, in my view correctly, caustically points out that this is as silly as suggesting that feet is only something we postulate for the convenience of explaining our walking behavior. We know very well from our experience that we have both feet and subjective conscious experiences.

Searle spends a good deal of time on the somewhat more sophisticated materialist thesis of functionalism, and first and foremost the functionalism that has come to be known as computational theory of mind. Here he also gives an outline and defense of his famous *Chinese room* argument. I won't go into the details of this discussion

But what, then, is Searle's own answer to the problem of the nature of consciousness? The way to proceed is to get rid of some of the old and loaded terminology inherent in the schism between the mental and physical. If you look at the facts of what we know, what we're left with is consciousness being a feature of the brain at the systemic level. As such it is *causally reducible* to the micro-level behavior of the neurons and neurotransmitters, and so on. However, it is not thereby *ontologically reducible* to these micro-level explanations—we still have a qualitative, subjective conscious experience that can not be captured in such third-person accounts. Consciousness is a biological feature of the brain at the system-level, much like digestion is a biological feature of the digestive system. Searle calls his view biological naturalism.

I think I generally agree with the view that he outlines. However, certain things appear a bit unclear to me. He proposes that the question of how our consciousness functions is to be answered by neurobiology, something I again generally agree with. But while neurobiology will undoubtedly give us plenty of answers to the technical and empirical questions about consciousness, and may do it in a way that doesn't have to deny the fact of our qualitative experiences, won't the explanations in a fundamental sense still be third-person explanations? Even if we were at the point where we could give a full neurobiological account of the functions our brain carries out, wouldn't the so-called *hard problem* of consciousness still persist to some extent? Perhaps not, I am not sure.

Outside of this question, Searle also gives some treatment to topics like intentionality, mental causation, free will, the unconscious, and the self. A prime virtue of the book is his admirably clear writing style. He doesn't seek to obfuscate, but lays out the arguments clearly and logically. I do get the feeling, here as in some of his other work, that he is at times somewhat uncharitable to his opponents, perhaps arguing some straw men, and he does sometimes jump rather quickly to the point of "let's just do it like this, and poof, you see I'm obviously right". Nonetheless, on the whole, I found this to be an accessible and reasoned introduction to some of the most tantalizing questions of contemporary philosophy.

Jeremiah says

Searle, the hobgoblin of philosophy of mind, lets his overly defensive, grating personality shine through in this breezy introduction.

Hesham Khaled says

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