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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and the Basic Facts[1]

This book has had an unusual publication history, and in this introduction I am going to explain its history and attempt to locate its two chapters within the larger research project of which they are a part.

In late Spring of 2001, I gave a series of lectures at the Sorbonne, one a large public lecture in French on the general topic of language and political power, and some presentations in English to smaller groups, ranging from lectures to seminar discussions, under various auspices and on topics ranging from the freedom of the will to the semiotics of wine tasting. I was asked if I would allow two of these presentations, the lecture I had given

1. I am indebted to Romelia Drager and Dagmar Searle for comments on earlier versions of this introduction. I thank Jennifer Hudin for preparing the index.

in French on political power and one of the lectures in English on the problem of free will, to be published in France. I agreed, on the natural supposition that the two lectures would appear in a journal, or some such venue. To my surprise, my editor, Patrick Savidan, published the two lectures as a rather elegant, though small, book in French called *Liberté et neurobiologie*.[2] I knew nothing of the publication plans until a boxful of books arrived at my home in Berkeley. It is the first time in my life that I published a book I did not know that I had written. Savidan did an excellent job translating the English lecture into French, and I was immensely helped in the preparation of the French text of the other lecture by Anne Hénault and especially by Natalie van Bockstaele.

Just as I was surprised by the publication of the French book I was equally surprised by swift publications of translations of the book from the French into German and Spanish, and, subsequently, Italian and Chinese. By coincidence, the publication in Germany came out while a great public debate was going on there about the status of free will, and the possibility of genuine free will, given contemporary neurobiology. In Germany, the book received several reviews, some quite negative, in daily newspapers of the sort that do not normally review philosophical works.

2. John R. Searle, *Liberté et neurobiologie: Réflexions sur le libre arbitre, le langage et le pouvoir politique*, ed. and trans. Patrick Savidan (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2004).

After all of this, I was approached by Columbia University Press with the proposal to produce an "English translation." I had the original English texts on which the *viva voce* lectures in Paris were based, so it was not necessary to translate the French text. Furthermore, in the intervening years, I had revised "Language and Power," and this revised version, called "Social Ontology and Political Power,"[3] is presented here, because it comes closer to my current views than does the original 2001 text.

The two lectures published here, one about the problem of free will and neurobiology and the other about language, social ontology and political power, do not appear to have any connection with each other. And at one level, the level of authorial intent, they really do not have any connection. It would never have occurred to me while I was preparing them that they would one day be published together. However, they are both parts of a much larger philosophical enterprise and it is worth explaining that enterprise, as it will deepen the reader's understanding of what I am trying to do in these lectures. Because I discuss some important philosophical issues in a rather brief and compressed fashion in what follows, I will provide references to some of the works in which I have discussed these same issues at greater length.

3. First published in English in F. Schmitt, ed., *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 195–210.

I. Philosophy and the Basic Facts

There is exactly one overriding question in contemporary philosophy and each of these lectures is an attempt to answer a part of that question. As a preliminary succinct formulation we could put it in this form: How do we fit in? In the longer version, it goes as follows: We now have a reasonably well-established conception of the basic structure of the universe. We have plausible theories about the origin of the universe in the Big Bang, and we understand quite a number of things about the structure of the universe in atomic physics and chemistry. We have even come to understand the nature of the chemical bond. We know a fair amount about our own development on this little Earth during the past five billion years of evolution. We understand that the universe consists entirely of particles (or whatever entities the ultimately true physics arrives at), and these exist in fields of force and are typically organized into systems. On our Earth, carbon-based systems made of molecules that also contain a lot of hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen have provided the substrate of human, animal and plant evolution. These and other such facts about the basic structure of the universe, I will call, for short, the "basic facts." The most important sets of basic facts, for our present purposes, are given in the atomic theory of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology.

There is, however, an interesting tension. It is not at all easy to reconcile the basic facts with a certain

conception we have of ourselves. Our self-conception derives in part from our cultural inheritance, but mostly it derives from our own experience. We have a conception of ourselves as conscious, intentionalistic, rational, social, institutional, political, speech-act performing, ethical and free will possessing agents. Now, the question is, How can we square this self-conception of ourselves as mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, etc., agents with a universe that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, unfree, nonrational, brute physical particles? In the end, perhaps we will have to give up on certain features of our self conception, such as free will. I see this family of questions as setting the agenda not only for my own work, but for the subject of philosophy for the foreseeable future. There are several specific questions, some of which I have dealt with elsewhere, that are part of the larger single question.

1) *Consciousness.* What exactly is consciousness and how does it fit in with the basic facts? I define "consciousness" as subjective, qualitative states of sentience or feeling or awareness. Waking experiences are typically conscious, but dreams are also a form of consciousness. Conscious states typically, but not always, have intentionality. The short answer to the question of how consciousness fits in with the basic facts is that conscious states are entirely caused by neuronal processes in the brain and are realized in the brain. This approach to the mind-body problem, however, leaves us with a number of philosophical problems such as, for

example: What are the relations between consciousness and intentionality and how does consciousness function causally to move our bodies? It also leaves us with very difficult neurobiological problems: How exactly does the brain cause conscious experiences, and how are those experiences realized in the brain? One of the tasks of the philosopher is to get the problem into such a shape that it can be subject to experimental testing in neurobiology. I believe that, to some extent, that is already happening, and this research is in fact now in progress in neurobiology, where the question of consciousness is vigorously pursued.[4]

2) *Intentionality.* There are similar questions about intentionality. "Intentionality" as used by philosophers and psychologists refers not only to cases of intending, in the ordinary sense in which I intend to go to the movies, but to any form of directedness or aboutness. Beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, loves, hates and perceptions are

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4. I have discussed these problems about consciousness and the related problems about intentionality in a number of works, especially:

Minds, Brains and Science, The 1984 Reith Lectures (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984); (London: Penguin, 1989); (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

The Rediscovery of the Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

The Mystery of Consciousness (New York: A New York Review Book, 1997); (London: Granta Books, 1997).

Mind: A Brief Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

all cases of intentional phenomena, along with intending to go to the movies. Many philosophers think that the special problem of intentionality is the mystery of how ordinary cell structures in the brain could be *about* something, how they could refer beyond themselves. In my view, intentionality only seems mysterious if we think of it as a very big problem, instead of breaking it down into a series of specific questions about how particular forms of intentionality, such as thirst and hunger, perception and intentional action, function in our lives and in the universe at large. We can separate the logical/ philosophical questions (for example, What exactly is the logical structure of intentionality?) from the biological questions (for example, How exactly are intentional states caused by brain processes? How are they realized in the brain? How do they function? How has intentionality evolved in humans and other animals?).[5]

A special form of intentionality, common to humans and other social animals, is what I call "collective intentionality," cases where humans and other animals are capable of cooperating and thus sharing common forms of intentionality, where the intentionality is not just in the first-person singular (I intend, I believe, I want, etc.), but would be expressed in the first-person plural (we intend, we believe, we want, etc.).

5. For more details, see John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

3) *Language*. In addition to having consciousness and intentionality, traits that humans share with many other species of animals, humans have the special ability to form derived intentionality, i.e. meaning, in sentences and speech acts. What exactly is meaning, and how does meaning enable words—which are, after all, merely sounds that come out of our mouths or marks we make on paper—to refer to objects, events and states of affairs in the world? This has been the main topic in the philosophy of language for the past century and I think that many, perhaps most, of the great achievements of philosophy in the past one hundred years have been in the philosophy of language. However, if there has been one flaw in the philosophy of language over the past century, it is that it is insufficiently naturalistic. The general approach that I am advocating is that we need to think of language as a manifestation and extension of more biologically primitive forms of intentionality. It is a mistake to treat language as if it were not part of human biology.[6]

4) *Rationality*. An animal that has consciousness, intentionality and language already has constraints of

6. Some of the books in which I have discussed the philosophy of language are:

Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind.

rationality. These are built into the structure of intentionality and language. An animal that does not have consciousness cannot have intentionality or language. Rationality, on my view, is not a separate faculty, something added to language and mind. It is an internal structural feature of intentionality and of language that intentional states and speech acts are subject to internal constraints of rationality. I will say more about this point later.

An account of rationality becomes essential in building an answer to our questions of how we fit into the basic facts. The standard accounts of rationality in our tradition, accounts that receive their finest mathematical expression in decision theory, seem to me in various ways defective. Specifically, they fail to see the special features of human rationality that come from having a human language. The use of language enables us to create desire-independent reasons for action. All sorts of speech acts, for example statement making and promise making, create commitments and obligations of various kinds. The structure of society also reveals all sorts of commitments, requirements, obligations, etc., and each of these is typically treated by rational agents as creating desire-independent reasons for action.[7]

Think what it means to find a parking ticket on your car's windshield, to accept an invitation to a party, or

7. For further discussion of rationality, see *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

to be called for jury duty. In all of these cases, society works only because you and others recognize these phenomena as creating desire-independent reasons for action. It is tempting, though mistaken, to think that all of these are maintained only by a system of sanctions. People who think that the sanctions are the only things that matter fail to recognize that the collective acceptance of the sanctions typically depends on the recognition of a prior system of desire-independent reasons for action.

5) *Free will*. Human rationality presupposes free will. The reason is that rationality must be able to make a difference. There must be a difference between rational and irrational behavior, but this is only possible if there is a space in which rationality can operate. The presupposition, in short, of rationality is that not all of our actions have antecedent conditions that are causally sufficient to determine the action. Unless we presuppose a certain room for maneuver, we cannot make sense of the notion of rationality and consequently we cannot make sense of the notion of obligations, speech acts and a whole lot of other things.

The problem of free will, in short, is how can such a thing exist? How can there exist genuinely free actions in a world where all events, at least at the macro level, apparently have causally sufficient antecedent conditions? Every event at that level appears to be determined by causes that preceded it. Why should acts performed during the apparent human consciousness

of freedom be an exception? It is true that there is an indeterminacy in nature at the quantum level, but that indeterminacy is pure randomness and randomness is not by itself sufficient to give us free will.

The problem of free will is unusual among contemporary philosophical issues in that we are nowhere remotely near to having a solution. I can give you a pretty good account of consciousness, intentionality, speech acts and of the ontology of society but I do not know how to solve the problem of free will.

Well, why is that important? There are lots of problems we do not have solutions to. The special problem of free will is that we cannot get on with our lives without presupposing free will. Whenever we are in a decision-making situation, or indeed, in any situation that calls for voluntary action, we have to presuppose our own freedom. Suppose you are given a choice in a restaurant between steak and veal. The waiter asks you "And sir, which would you prefer, the steak or the veal?" You cannot say to the waiter, "Look, I am a determinist. I will just wait and see what I order because I know that my order is determined." The refusal, i.e. the conscious, intentional speech act of refusing to place an order, is only intelligible to you if you understand it as an exercise of your own free will. The point that I am making now is not that free will is a fact. We don't know if it is a fact. The point is that given the structure of our consciousness, we cannot proceed except on the presupposition of free will.

6) *Society and institutions.* What exactly is the ontology of society? In particular, how is it possible that there can be a class of facts that are perfectly objective, yet exist only because we believe that they exist? I am thinking of such facts as that George W. Bush is now President of the United States, or that the object in my wallet is a twenty-dollar bill. This is another project which I have worked on.[8] Here too I insist on a resolutely naturalistic account. We must see human institutional structures such as money, property, marriage, universities, income tax, cocktail parties, summer vacations, lawyers, licensed drivers, and professional football players as extensions of our capacity for collective intentionality and our capacity for language. Once you have language and social cooperation, you already have the possibility of creating institutional reality in the form of money, property, government, marriage, etc.

7) *Politics.* Once we see that consciousness, language, rationality and society are all expressions of a more fundamental underlying biology, then it seems to me that we can have a more naturalistic ethical and political philosophy than has been traditional in our society. Oddly enough, it seems to me that the very possibility of this was created by Rawls's theory of justice.[9]

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8. Especially in *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

9. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

In my philosophical childhood, it was widely accepted that substantive first-order theories in political philosophy and ethics were impossible because claims in those areas could not have objective truth. This was supposed to be shown by Hume's famous claim that you cannot derive an "ought" from an "is." If philosophy is concerned with stating truths, and there are no truths about how we ought to behave, or what sort of political society we ought to have, then philosophy can have nothing to say about how we ought to behave in ethics or politics. When I was an undergraduate, it was widely believed that political philosophy was dead[10] and that ethics, as a subject matter in philosophy, was the same thing as "metaethics," which consisted of analyses of the use of ethical terms such as "good" and "ought." The study of politics was thought to be an empirical discipline, and hence if there was to be something called "political philosophy," this would have to be on all fours with, for example, a subject we might invent, geological philosophy. One might examine the use of political vocabulary to study its conceptual nature as one might study the use of geological vocabulary. But the idea of substantive political theory was regarded as obsolete. I fought against

10. P. Laslett in *Philosophy, Politics and Society* wrote "For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead." See Peter Laslett, ed., introduction to *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1956), vii.

this conception as early as 1964, in my article "How to derive 'ought' from 'is.' "[11] But I have to say the most effective disproof of the prevailing orthodoxy was provided by the publication of Rawls's book in which he simply did what was supposed to be impossible to do, that is, to provide rational justifications for substantive claims about justice.

8) *Ethics.* What would a "naturalistic" ethics look like? It would be based on two other completely natural phenomena, first, our basic biological needs, and second, our biologically given capacity for rationality, which is itself a constitutive and structural feature of both intentionality and language.

I have listed eight areas of subject matter where it seems to me there is now enormous scope for a different type of philosophical investigation. I would not wish to suggest that these are the only such areas. On the contrary, there are many I have not listed. One area in which I wish I had more to say is aesthetics, another is mathematics. I think there is an aesthetic dimension to all conscious experiences. Why do we not have a satisfactory theoretical account of this? Again, what sorts of facts are mathematical facts, and what sorts of entities are mathematical entities such as numbers?

11. "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is,' " *Philosophical Review* 73 (January 1964).