Minds in Action

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In his recent book *Rationality in Action*, John Searle attempts to resolve some of the puzzles of both action theory and philosophy of mind through the development of a powerful yet common-sense conception of practical rationality. Rejecting the essentially Humean "Classical Model" of desire-driven rationality, Searle argues for a theory which includes causal gaps, freedom of the will, an irreducible self, and desire-independent reasons for action. In the final chapter, he surveys his options on the difficult question of the neurobiology of free will.

The basic strength of both Searle's critique of the Classical Model and of his own positive theory lies in his appeal to our everyday experience of practical rationality. We cannot, he argues, understand even mundane actions like settling a bar tab on the Classical Model, let alone more complex philosophical issues like weakness of will, the act of promising, and deciding between reasons for action. In contrast, the richness of Searle's theory handles such issues with relative ease. Perhaps more interestingly, it provides a fruitful foundation for further philosophical argument and speculation.

The Causes of Action

According to Searle's survey, one of the central assumptions of the Classical Model of Rationality is a causalist theory of action according to which belief-desire pairs are efficient causes of action—or more precisely *sufficient* and *antecedent* efficient causes of action (Searle 2001, 8). This Davidsonian causalism seems plausible at first glance: I want to write this paper; I believe that I must type words on my computer to do so; so here I am, typing words on my computer. Generally speaking, we do commonly appeal to beliefs and desires to explain the past, present, and future actions of rational creatures.

But is it really true that action is *automatically* and *necessarily* generated from beliefs, desires, and other antecedent mental states? Searle argues no—on two counts. First, if causalism were true, we would be "outside the scope of rationality altogether" like the person "in the grip of an obsession or an addiction" (Searle 2001, 13, 12). The whole process of deliberating and deciding presumes that a person's "set of beliefs and desires by itself is not causally sufficient to determine [his] action" (Searle 2001, 13). That process, after all, would be a pointless waste of time if our beliefs and desires did necessitate a particular course of action; we could instead simply wait and see what we do (Searle 2001, 14). In essence, Searle's argument is that the genuine exercise of rationality requires the possibility of irrationality—and that alternative presupposes freedom from sufficient causal determinants (Searle 2001, 66). Or, at he later notes,

> Rationality applies only where there is free choice because rationality must be able to make a difference. If my actions are completely caused by my beliefs and desires, so that I can't really help myself, then I have no choice and rationality can make no difference at all to my behavior (Searle 2001, 142).

Searle's second reason for rejecting causalism is that our background awareness typically includes "a sense of alternate possibilities" (Searle 2001, 67). So for example, no matter how overwhelming my reasons for writing this paper are, I can (and unfortunately sometimes do) still find myself staring blankly at the walls, wondering about the cause of my dog's illness, heading

to the kitchen in search of food, and so on. To keep myself writing, I must "make a continuous voluntary effort" (Searle 2001, 15). Based upon these and other observations, Searle develops an alternative to the causalism of the Classical Model. According to him, the processes of deliberating, deciding, and acting involve a series of causal "gaps" in which we (as irreducible selves) exercise our freedom of the will.

Generally speaking, we find these causal gaps where "the reasons preceding the decisions and the actions are not experienced by the agent as setting causally sufficient conditions for the decisions and actions" (Searle 2001, 62). At such points, we "sense alternative future decisions and actions as causally open to us" (Searle 2001, 62). Searle identifies three basic gaps: one between reasons and decision, one between decision and the initiation of action, and one between the initiation and completion of an action.

The first gap is "the gap of rational decision making, where you try to make up your mind [about] what you are going to do" (Searle 2001, 14).[1] So we can have reasons to act and even deliberate about those reasons, yet never come to a decision on a course of action. A man might consider proposing to his girlfriend, but abandon his deliberations at any point before he decides what to do. He might be swayed by morally suspect considerations, such as fear of his mother's disapproval. Or, more innocently, he might realize that he needs more information or a good night's sleep to decide wisely. Or he might allow himself to be distracted by a phone call or pressing thought. Or, of course, he might actually decide—and thereby create a "prior intention" for himself (Searle 2001, 62).

Normally, we think of the movement from deliberation to decision as an advancement along the path to action. Such is certainly an accurate characterization for well-defined, concrete decisions like "I'll propose to her tonight after dinner." However, we find no such progress with vague decisions like "Well, I'll propose one of these days…", as the action (if ever undertaken) would require a far more focused and detailed intention to motivate and guide it. Such pseudo-decisions are thus perhaps best understood as a convenient method of self-deceptively concealing the abandonment of the process of deliberation from ourselves.

The second gap lies between "the decision and the action"—or more precisely, between "the prior intention and the actual initiation of action in the onset of an intention-in-action" (Searle 2001, 62). In other words, a decision is not a sufficient cause of action either. Having already decided, we might nevertheless choose to deliberate again in light of new information. We might simply fail to exert the necessary effort of acting, telling ourselves "Oh, not today." In cases where the decision to act is a decision to act *now*, this second gap is really only a moment in time. But when the decision is to act in the future, this gap can last anywhere from seconds to years. For our potential fiancé who has decided to propose tonight, he has a few hours in which to exercise his will in this second gap, to abandon his prior intention before initiating the intention-in-action if he so chooses.

Searle's third gap, found in "actions and activities extended in time," exists between "the initiation of the action and its continuation to completion" (Searle 2001, 15). Or, more technically speaking, it lies between "the causes in the form of the prior intention to perform the action and the intention-in-action on the one hand, and the actual carrying out of the complex activity to its completion, on the other" (Searle 2001, 63). So we might abandon an action in the midst of it due to fatigue, due to boredom, due to the realization we're not achieving our goals,

[1] Searle also characterizes this gap as "between the deliberative process and the decision itself" (Searle 2001, 62). This formulation strikes me as misleading, as this gap is not after deliberation, but within the process of deliberation itself.

or due to some other reason. In abandoning an action, we might choose to do something else—or we might do nothing. Notably, causalism's failure to recognize this particular gap was the basis of Harry Frankfurt's general critique that causalism cannot adequately distinguish actions from nonactions in cases where "a person, whatever his involvement in the events from which his action arises, loses all connection with the movements of his body at the moment when his action begins" (Frankfurt 1988, 71).

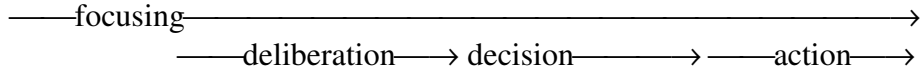
The three gaps, Searle notes, are merely "different aspects of the same feature of consciousness," namely that "our conscious experiences of making up our minds and our conscious experiences of acting… are not experienced as have psychologically sufficient causal conditions that make them happen" (Searle 2001, 63). We have to keep exerting the effort of will in order to deliberate, to decide, and to act.

But what is it, we might ask, that operates in the gap, that transports us from one side of the gap to the other? Searle's answer is the deeply anti-Humean notion of an irreducible self, i.e. "an entity which experiences its own activities as more than an inert bundle" (Searle 2001, 93). This self is neither "an experience, nor… an object that is experienced" but rather "the agent of action" (Searle 2001, 93, 92). Importantly, this notion of the self allows us to posit a "causal gap" in deliberation and action without committing ourselves to an "explanatory gap" (Searle 2001, 85).[2] In accounting for our own and others' actions, we need not say that our deliberations, decisions, and actions entail "an element of randomness" because they lack sufficient antecedent conditions (Searle 2001, 84). Rather, we (implicitly) appeal to an irreducible self "operat[ing] in the gap" (Searle 2001, 85). Or, as Searle explains: "the reason that we can rationally accept explanations that do not cite sufficient causes in these cases is that we understand that the explanations are about rational selves in their capacity as agents" (Searle 2001, 84).

Searle's basic "geography of the gap" seems correct—but incomplete. From a purely phenomenological perspective, we seem to need to exert our will before we begin deliberation at all—in the act of focusing the mind. Imagine, for example, that you are resting comfortably on the sofa in your living room after a difficult day of philosophizing. You close your eyes and let your thoughts wander aimlessly. You are on the verge of sleep when the phone rings. It takes a few moments for you to figure out what the ^&@(#$* is making so much noise. After recognizing the source of the noise as the phone, you search for the cordless headset, slowly becoming more awake, more oriented to the situation and your surroundings with each successive ring. When you answer the call, you are still not quite fully mentally "there." But as the conversation progresses, your thoughts become more organized, more coherent. This process of gradual awareness of and alertness to the world is what psychologist Nathaniel Branden calls the act of "focusing." In choosing to focus, we set our minds "to the goal of awareness, clarity, [and] intelligibility, with regard to the object of [our] concern" and thereby "move from (relative) mental passivity to purposeful mental activity" (Branden 2001, 41). Focusing allows us to organize and direct our thoughts; as such, it is the precondition of deliberation, decision, and action (Branden 2001, 41). Branden, in fact, argues that the choice to focus or not is our most basic form of freedom of the will, as it does not involve the sort of causal antecedents (e.g. "values, interests, knowledge, and context") that our other choices do (Branden 2001, 43). It is, we might say, the most basic sort of mental effort we are capable of exerting.

[2] This is an odd inversion of some of the "gap" arguments in philosophy of mind (e.g. those of Levine and Nagel at times) which deny any causal/ontological gap between the mental and the physical while arguing for an explanatory/epistemological gap.

This notion of mental focus, when added to Searle's three gaps of freedom of the will, highlights the basic precondition of the exercise of practical rationality. It explains how we move from the mental stupor of near sleep every morning to the deliberation of whether to get out of bed or not. More importantly, the possibility of going out of focus explains why we sometimes simply abandon the process of deliberation or action midstream. In such cases, we stop exerting the necessary the effort for thought, and thereby allow our minds to "drift passively" (Branden 2001, 42). When motivated to go out of focus by the prospect of some unpleasant conclusion, we could be described as self-deceiving. So with the addition of this fourth, overarching gap, we might represent freedom of the will as follows:



The Neurobiology of Freedom of the Will

In the final chapter of *Rationality in Action*, Searle tackles the question of the possible biological basis of our phenomenal experience of the gaps. He argues that there are two basic theses we could adopt—neither of them satisfying.

The first thesis is "psychological libertarianism with neurobiological determinism" according to which "the indeterminacy at the psychological level is matched by a completely deterministic system at the neurobiological level" (Searle 2001, 283). So we recognize the psychological reality of the gap, while denying that any actual causal gaps in the brain. As a result, the freedom of the will experienced in the gaps is simply an illusion; "the psychological processes of rational decision making do not really matter" (Searle 2001, 285). Our mental states are completely determined by our brain states; our mental lives are completely epiphenomenal.

This first thesis is appealing perhaps only because it preserves the presumptions about mechanical determinism that have served science so well in recent centuries. However, as Searle notes, it doesn't square well with Darwinian evolution, as "the incredibly elaborate, complex, sensitive—and above all—biologically expensive system of human and animal conscious rational decision making would actually make no difference whatever to the life and survival of the organism" (Searle 2001, 286).

In his essay "The Knowledge Argument," Frank Jackson defends epiphenomenalism from this evolutionary line of attack, arguing that evolution doesn't guarantee that all of an species' traits will be conductive to survival (Jackson 2002, 277). Rather evolution merely asserts that "any evolved characteristic [must be] either conducive to survival or a by-product of one that is so conducive" (Jackson 2002, 277). Jackson uses the example of the heavy coats of polar bears, which are not themselves conductive to survival as they slow the polar bears down, but simply a side effect of the warm coats that are so necessary to survival (Jackson 2002, 277). The implication is, of course, that conscious experience could be the evolutionary by-product of our highly adaptive brains. Significantly, we do find such maladaptive by-products in the functions of consciousness itself. Our capacity to deceive ourselves, to ignore obvious facts because they are unpleasant, is not itself particularly conducive to survival, as such self-deception often plays a role in self-destructive behaviors such as heavy drinking, drug abuse, and dangerous thrill-seeking. But in order to gain the highly adaptive capacity to selectively attend to some issues and while ignoring others, we must also be able to deliberately direct such attention in the wrong direct; it's just part of the package. Given these considerations, Searle's

argument from efficient evolution merely seems to indicate that such epiphenomenalism is unlikely, but not wholly impossible.

Another possible response to this first thesis is to simply say that, if true, it wouldn't matter whether we believed it or not. The whole process of thinking through our beliefs about causality, including considering arguments, evaluating evidence, deciding, and so on, would be completely irrelevant. The issue here is not that we ought to reject revolutionary philosophical ideas merely because they are upsetting or overwhelming to us à la Fodor. Rather, the point is that concepts such as justification, rationality, and truth mean little if free will is, in fact, illusory. Furthermore, if we are capable of being so wholly and completely deceived about free will—to the point where we continue to experience a thoroughgoing sense of freedom even though we know it to be an illusion—then we have little ground on which to insist that our views about determinism must be correct. After all, those views could be just as illusory as freedom of the will. In fact, the illusion could really be determinism, not freedom of the will at all. Generally speaking, the acceptance of the deep skepticism required to reject free will seems to preclude justified belief in any of our other cherished views.

Searle's second thesis is "system causation with consciousness and indeterminacy" such that "the absence of sufficient conditions at the psychological level is matched by a parallel lack of causally sufficient conditions at the neurobiological level" (Searle 2001, 286). On this model, consciousness is a "system feature" of the brain, such that "the whole system moves in a way that is causal, but not based upon causally sufficient reasons" (Searle 2001, 287). Consequently, the system "has causal effects on each element, even though the system of made up of elements" (Searle 2001, 289).

The basic worry about this thesis is that it violates those cherished notions of determinism that have served science, including biology, so well. And how, Searle asks, would the neurobiology work without sufficient causes? One method of making this thesis more palatable is to loosen the grip of determinism somewhat. The presumption is that we need a universal and strong form of determinism in order to ground science, that we need to locate causality in the principle that "every action is determined by antecedently sufficient causal conditions" (Searle 2001, 277). But perhaps causality can be understood better as a principle along the lines of the principle of the uniformity of nature, according to which exactly similar entities will act in the exact same way in the exact same circumstances. As entities that are able to select our own causes of action through freedom of the will, we would not violate such causality. Strict determinism would still apply to non-self-causing entities.

Of course, this brief proposal is not intended as anything like a well-developed solution to the problem of reconciling free will with causality. Rather, it is merely a suggestion that perhaps it is our concept of causality that is in need of revision, not our commitment to freedom of the will.

References

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