



Università degli Studi di Palermo  
*Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*

*Laudatio (English Version)*  
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I am deeply honored to present some of the reasons why we wish to confer the honorary degree in Philosophy and History of Ideas on John Rogers Searle, one of the most famous and influential living philosophers, who has been working intensively and theoretically on the elaboration of an innovative theory that brings forth the creativity and specificity of human beings within a unified account of the universe as composed entirely of physical particles in fields of force, a theory based on recent scientific findings.

The relevance and importance of his theoretical perspective is clear when one considers some of his pioneering rediscoveries that have contributed to some of the most important cultural changes of the second half of the Twentieth century, such as the rediscovery of mind and consciousness, of rationality and truth, of ethics and deontology, against every type of physicalist and computational reductionism.

These rediscoveries are connected to significant paradigmatic changes which he has been developing through his 24 books, that have been translated into 21 languages, his countless essays and through many international debates in which he has been engaged with some of the most important protagonists of the philosophical, scientific and neuroscientific scenes, from Putnam to Habermas, from Rorty and Derrida to Kim, from Eccles and Crick to Edelman, Koch and Freeman.

His decisive contribution to changing the priorities of the philosophical agenda of the Twentieth century comes from the success of his innovative research project which gives an account of the existence of our human reality, made up of consciousness, rationality, free will, speech acts, ethics, and ordinary facts, such as political organizations, governments, universities, family, property, etc., all in a universe consisting only, according to contemporary science, of “mindless, meaningless physical microparticles” that “organize themselves in systems and are in fields of force”.

At the centre of this philosophical project is a new idea of mind as an “embodied emergence”, a new “form (“εἶδος”)” of the brain, capable of interacting with the world to fit it and to change it, a concept which he has been elaborating both against the Cartesian idea of mind as a *res* separated from body and reality, and only capable of mirroring it, as well as against every materialist and computational reductionism.

In a time when the conviction was widespread that the only alternative compatible with contemporary science against the Cartesian dualistic prejudice was to deny mind and “consciousness in the sense of inner qualitative subjective states of awareness and sentience”<sup>1</sup> by eliminating them or reducing them to the physical or the computational, he has been identifying, against the mainstream, “the mode of existence of consciousness” as a “higher-level state of the brain”, which is not “over and above the cerebral system in which it is physically realized”.

He can claim the coherence of such a mode of existence in the “exactly one world” we live in as he explicitly extends to the mind/brain relationship the

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. SEARLE, *The Mystery of Consciousness*, Granta Books, London 1997, 194.

explanatory model dominating in the various areas of science, according to which microstructural physical phenomena can cause system macrofeatures – for example, the liquidity of water or the solidity of a table – which do not exist independently of the microlevel explaining and realizing them. On the grounds of this model, he can conceive of our mental states as irreducible and real as “system” macrofeatures of the physical structure of the brain while denying their existence as separate entities with respect to the brain processes determining them.

Thus, against epiphenomenalism, which represents our desires, intentions and decisions as all but impotent, “causally inert” epiphenomena, he can also claim the capability of our conscious system to “have effect”, through “top-down” causation, on the physical states of body and brain, on the individual elements, such as neurons and synapses, constituting it. With his endorsement, shared by the well-known neurophysiologist Roger Sperry, of the systemic model of causation, according to which “the system, as a system, has causal effects on each element, even though the system is made up of these elements”, he can maintain the capacity of mind to produce changes in the world in the same way that every physical system, from engines to computers, can do this. That is, taking into consideration that the causal efficacy of system macrofeatures, as recognized in all areas of science, he claims, against the well-known “causal exclusion dilemma”, that “in the conscious brain, each neuron in the conscious portions of the system can be affected by the consciousness of the brain, even though there are no objects but neurons (with glial cells, and the rest)”,<sup>2</sup> in the same way that, according to Sperry’s well-known example, invoked by Searle, of how in every wheel the movements of the molecules are determined by the wheel itself, even though it is entirely constituted by the molecules.

But it is not only with regard to mind and consciousness that the paradigm of Searle’s biological naturalism can give a satisfactory account of human beings with respect to the most recent findings of contemporary science. In the course of his coherent and progressive theoretical path, starting with his analysis of the complex structure of speech acts, he has been developing a convincing and innovative theory of rationality centred on the idea of the embeddedness of rational commitments within the structure of intentionality and language, as well as of truth, ethics, deontology and human sociality, a theory capable of effectively opposing the dominant relativistic and skeptical intellectual climate.

Having made explicit some important implications of his theory of speech acts as “intentional, rule-governed behaviors”, identifying the specific commitments to which we are constrained by each type of speech act, on the basis of the constitutive rules underlying each of them, he has, in more recent works, theorized the crucial importance of the deontic dimension of speech acts and intentional states, discovering and showing the “rational potential” embodied in every ordinary practice. He has shown, particularly, the constitutive nature of the commitment to truth and rationality for the human being as a linguistic animal, bringing forth the constitutive human

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<sup>2</sup> J. R. SEARLE, *Rationality in Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2001, 289.

disposition toward cooperation, norm following and action based on desire-independent reasons.

These developments, together with his characterization of intentionality as a biological phenomenon capable of causal efficacy, also propose in an entirely innovative way its normative character, so that Searle's theory of intentionality can claim legitimacy within the new paradigm of contemporary science. It is in direct opposition to "the tradition according to which biology would concern the lower levels, while intentionality would be up there, in Frege's III realm"<sup>3</sup> that Searle maintains, using the achievements of contemporary science on "systemic causation", that "human biology contains semantic properties (i.e. that these are parts of the biological phenomena) and that these have conditions of satisfaction which are subjected to rational constraints and which are entirely normative"<sup>4</sup>.

Thus he can conceive of rationality no longer as something separate, external to intentional phenomena, but as constitutive of them. He goes so far as to write that, in his theory, "intentionality is entirely normative: the notions of success and failure, of conditions of satisfactions, are normative notions; the notions of rational forms of intentionality, the norms of well-grounded belief or of rational desire, are all notions that express rational constraints"<sup>5</sup>.

But he has also revealed, coherently with the model of a plastic mind capable of acting on the world and transforming it, the creative power of the human mind as able to create through declarations, a specific type of speech act, the institutional reality in which we are immersed. In fact, he has elaborated an original theory of society, institutional reality and human civilization that reconstructs, using the key notions of his theory of language and mind, such as "collective intentionality" and "constitutive rules", the process of the human making of institutional facts as a process in which, by virtue of the power of our mind and language to create a reality by simply representing it as already existing, the human being reveals itself as able to mould human civilization through the collective imposition of "status functions" on entities that would not have those functions by their own nature.

For all of this, because he has written a new and important chapter in the history of ideas with his complex theory of intentionality and consciousness, of language and society, a theory which can be coherently located in the constellation of the results of contemporary scientific research; because he keeps looking for convincing answers, though with the awareness of their tentativeness and fallibility, to the most urging problems that can be posed in relationship to human beings and their freedom; for the coherence of his significant theoretical path, with his constant commitment to human beings and freedom since the days of his contributions to the Free Speech Movement, as has been recognized by the multitude of prizes awarded to him, such as the Distinguished Teaching Award at the University of California, Berkeley (1999), the Jean Nicod Prize in France in 2000, the

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<sup>3</sup> J. R. Searle, *Coscienza, linguaggio, società*, a cura di U. Perone, Introduzione di F. Di Lorenzo Ajello, Rosenberg&Sellier, Torino 2009, p. 98

<sup>4</sup> Ivi

<sup>5</sup> Ivi

National Humanities Medal in the USA in 2005, the Mind and Brain Prize in Torino in 2006, the Puffendorf Medal in Sweden in 2006; for the connections he has developed with, and the friendship he has shown to our University and to our young scholars and students, the M.A. course in Philosophy and History of Ideas would like to thank the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy and its Chairman, the University of Palermo and its Chancellor for having accepted and sustained the proposal to confer the *honoris causa* degree on John Rogers Searle, whose voice has been – and still is – an important testimony to the inexhaustibility of the questions to which philosophical reflection is always called to answer.