

## **Making Consciousness Useful**

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The mind-body problem has become somewhat of a cornerstone problem in philosophy, as it seems to be treated as a problem that, when solved, will help pave the way for answers to other problems. The same problem has also been treated as impossibly difficult as the two standard views (dualism and materialism) seem to provide no satisfying answer. With this in mind, John Searle has attempted to solve the problem by treading a new path, which is claimed to be neither materialism nor dualism. In doing so, it seems that Searle presents a theory of consciousness which can be used to bolster Jaegwon Kim's account of reduction and emergence, as Kim's account of these matters, as it stands, does not take into account the divide between ontological reduction and causal reduction and the application of such a divide to Kim's theory shows how it is that one can hold that consciousness is causally reducible while not being ontologically reducible, thus allowing consciousness to be both functionalizable and intrinsic.

In order to understand how Searle's work and the work of Kim match up it is first important to show what both of them say about the matter of consciousness and mental causation. Searle believes that consciousness is fully caused by the underlying neuronal processes of the brain, but in a way such that the cause (the neuronal processes) and the effect (the brain) are simultaneous (79). What this means for Searle is that consciousness is just a higher-level feature of the brain than neurons. As Searle states, "Conscious states are realized in the brain as features of the brain system, and thus exist at a level higher than that of neurons and

synapses" (79). In this way, consciousness is entirely causally reducible to lower-level goings-ons in the brain.

But, while consciousness is entirely causally reducible to lower-level processes in the brain, this does not mean that consciousness is fully reducible to the underlying processes of the brain, as there is a division between ontological reduction and causal reduction (Searle 83). Consciousness, while causally reducible, is not ontologically reducible to just the activity of neurons, because if one makes a total reduction of consciousness to just the activity of neurons one loses the entire point to the concept of consciousness (Searle 84). The reason one loses the entire point of the concept if an ontological reduction takes place is because the first-person aspect of consciousness is lost when one gives a third-person description of the neuronal firings that cause consciousness. As Searle states, "But the main point of having the concept of consciousness is to capture the first-person subjective features of the phenomenon and this point is lost if we redefine consciousness in third-person, objective terms. We would still need a name for the first-person ontology" (84).

In order to further flesh out this point, Searle gives the example of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Even though a performance of the music is reducible to wave motions in the air, an explanation of just the wave motions does not provide an account of what is interesting with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. As Searle states, "Performances of the Ninth can be reduced to wave motions in the air, but that is not what is interesting to us about the performance. The music critic who writes, 'All I could hear were wave motions,' has missed the point of the performance" (84). Searle likens this to consciousness in that if one were to reduce consciousness to just the activities of neurons, the interesting part of consciousness would still be

missing. Searle writes, "Analogously you could do a reduction of consciousness and intentionality, but you would still need a vocabulary to talk about the surface features" (84).

Searle then applies his discussion of consciousness to mental causation and he sets out the two main problems about mental causation, which are, "How can the mental, which is weightless and ethereal, ever affect the physical world? And second, if the mental did function causally would it not produce causal overdetermination?" (Searle 147). The answer to these two problems, according to Searle, comes through realizing that consciousness is causally reducible to neuronal processes in the brain. Since consciousness is entirely causally reducible to neuronal activity, then whenever you have something that is caused by the neurons in the brain, that underlie consciousness, you also have the same thing being caused by consciousness, because the neuronal activity and consciousness are the same thing, but with two different sorts of descriptions. As Searle writes:

The answer to the two puzzles is first that the mental is simply a feature (at the level of the system) of the physical structure of the brain, and second, causally speaking, there are not two independent phenomena, the conscious effort and the unconscious neuron firings. There is just the brain system, which has one level of description where neuron firings are occurring and another level of description, the level of the system, where the system is conscious and indeed consciously trying to raise its arm" (147).

What this means is that whether one chooses to talk about the neuronal activity or whether one chooses to talk about consciousness, when discussing a case of causation, one is just talking about the same thing occupying the same spot in the causal chain.

In order to understand Kim's account of consciousness and mental causation, and how Searle's account can be applied to it, one needs to first look at Kim's account of reduction and emergence. For Kim, whether a higher-level property is able to be reduced to a lower-level property is dependent on the higher-level property being functionalized. In order to reduce a higher-level property to a lower-level property, one must: (1) functionalize the higher-level property (2) show something at the lower-level can be found to perform the functions of the higher-level property and (3) give a theory for how the lower-level properties perform this function (Kim 10). In order to see how this would work, one can view the example of a kidney where: (1) the kidney can be functionalized as something that filters blood (2) it can be found that the muscles and tissues filter blood and (3) one can provide a theory as to how the muscles and tissues perform the function of filtering the blood. The upshot of Kim's theory is that any higher-level property that can be functionalized in this way can be reduced to a lower-level property (Kim 10-11). As a result, any higher-level property that cannot be functionalized in this way is an emergent property. For Kim the only sort of thing that winds up being emergent is conscious experience (qualia), because conscious experience, for Kim, is intrinsic and if one were to functionalize it would lose its intrinsic nature (18). Since, consciousness is not functionalizable, according to Kim, it cannot be reduced to a lower-level property and therefore is emergent (18).

While consciousness is emergent, it turns out in Kim's theory to be causally inert. In his discussion of emergent properties and causation, Kim first rejects the idea that a mental property could causally influence the underlying problems that brought about the emergent property, because if one were to hold to such a claim, it would place one in the metaphysically strange position of saying that something can causally influence what caused it (Kim 29). Kim here

gives the example of it being strange to think that a pain at time T could causally act on the neuro-states at time T, which caused the pain at time T (29).

It might then seem as though an emergent property might be able to act causally upon future lower-level properties. But if one provides a causal explanation of the higher-level property causing a future lower-level property, then why Kim asks, can one not just provide the same causal explanation but instead of talking of the higher-level property causing the new lower-level property just simply talk about the lower-level property that gave rise to the higher-level property as causing the new lower-level property? Instead of talking about something like pain causing another lower-level event, why not just talk about the lower-level properties (the underlying neuro-states) as causing the new lower-level event (Kim 32). If pain is causally sufficient for causing something, then the neuro-states that caused the pain are also sufficient for causing the same thing. As such, higher-level properties have no causal ability over and above the lower-level property, so one does not need to talk of the higher-level property causing something and can just focus on the causal power of the lower-level property (Kim 32).

Before continuing on to a comparison between Searle and Kim, it is important to look at what exactly it is for a thing to be intrinsic, as anything that falls under this heading is unfunctionalizable and, hence, irreducible for Kim. Steve Yabao, as quoted in Sandra Mitchell's *Unsimple Truths*, gives a fairly down to earth description of what intrinsic means. He says, "You know what an intrinsic property is: it's a property that a thing has (or lacks) regardless of what may be going on outside of itself" (Mitchell 29). Something that is intrinsic also is stated as being something that is "...not describable in extrinsic, material terms of what causes it and what it in turn causes" (Mitchell 28-29).

With this general description of intrinsic in mind, we can look at just why Kim believes consciousness is intrinsic and what exactly this means. Kim gives no argument for why he holds that consciousness is intrinsic. He simply states, "Here I don't want to rehearse the standard arguments pro or con, but merely affirm, for what it's worth, my own bias toward the pro side: qualia are intrinsic properties if anything is, and to functionalize them is to eliminate them as intrinsic properties" (Kim 18). It's hard to tell, for me at least, what exactly it means for consciousness to be intrinsic, but what I believe Kim means is that it is the first-person experience, the "what it is to be" aspect of consciousness, that makes it intrinsic. Pointing to the first person experience of consciousness as the portion of consciousness that makes it intrinsic helps to explain why it is that one can functionalize many different things, but not functionalize consciousness, as a functionalization of consciousness requires explaining consciousness in third-person manner, which effectively eliminates the first-person aspect of consciousness, thus removing its intrinsic status.

If taken this way, it would seem that Kim's discussion of consciousness and why it is non-reducible seems to fall in line with what Searle has to say about why consciousness is not ontologically reducible. Both seem to be stating that the reason consciousness is not fully ontologically reducible to underlying neuronal activity, whether the reduction involves functionalizing or not, is simply because any sort of reduction, in this manner, is going to leave out the important part of consciousness -- the first person aspect of it.

However, as seen earlier in the discussion of Searle, there is the distinction to be made between ontological and causal reduction. It seems, at least to me, that if one recognizes such a distinction, one is able to understand how one can functionalize consciousness and yet still have it remain intrinsic. One can do so by giving the functionalization of consciousness as the causal

reduction of consciousness to neuronal processes, but say that this does not show that consciousness is ontologically reducible to just these neuronal processes, therefore allowing consciousness to still retain its first-person nature and thus remain intrinsic. If one is to adhere to this distinction between ontological and causal reduction, then it would seem that one could further Kim's theory of reduction, based on functionalizing, to also apply to consciousness while still avoiding the problems that Kim sought to avoid.

Furthermore, the distinction between ontological and causal reduction paves the way for one to use Searle to provide a notion of consciousness that can be scientifically studied and remain intrinsic, as it allows one to realize that there are two ways of looking at consciousness, each of which develop from either the causal reduction or the ontological reduction. The first way of looking at consciousness is to look at it as being identical to the entire system of the brain, in so far as it is causally concerned. The second way to view consciousness is as something that has a first-person aspect that is so important to consciousness that one would not be able to provide a full account of consciousness in a third-person manner, as doing so would completely miss capturing this essential feature. The first view of consciousness would make a science of consciousness viable, as science could show just what causes consciousness, how it all works, how far it extends in terms of causal power, and pretty much everything about consciousness, while not being limited by trying to preserve the first-person aspect of consciousness. In this way the first view of consciousness would match up with the one given through causal reduction. The second view would allow for consciousness to remain intrinsic, as its first-person aspect would be essential to the view and could not be separated from it. This second view would match up with the one given by through the ontological reduction, or to be more accurate, the lack of one.

As a result, one can see that there are just two different concepts of consciousness that are used when certain aspects of consciousness are more important than others. If a causal explanation of consciousness is what is important, as it seems to be for science, then one focuses on the first use of the concept of consciousness; whereas if the first-person aspect of consciousness is important, then one focuses on the second use. Getting straight on how we're using a term and why we're using it allows us to see what aspects of the term are important and why they are. In the case of consciousness, getting straight on the different usages allows us a way to see just how consciousness can be tackled by science without endangering the aspects of consciousness that are involved in other usages of the term.

Searle seems to be making, at least to me, something along the lines of this argument himself, when he states:

“Why couldn't we make an ontological reduction and say that consciousness was nothing but neuronal behavior? Well, we could, and we might for medical or other scientific purposes redefine consciousness in terms of microsubstrates, as we have redefined solidity and liquidity [...] But the main point of having the concept of consciousness is to capture the first-person subjective features of the phenomenon and this point is lost if we redefine consciousness in third-person, objective terms. We would still need a name for the first-person ontology” (83-84).

At the very least, Searle's account is in agreement with such a treatment of consciousness, insofar as the concept of consciousness that we employ is relevant to what features of consciousness are important for us.



When we come to the view of there being two different notions of consciousness, it is simple to see how it can be applied to Kim's theory of reduction and emergence. In making his arguments about consciousness and its being non-reducible and emergent, Kim seems to only recognize the notion of consciousness that is concerned with the first-person aspect. However, now that we are armed with a distinction between the different notions of consciousness we can see that it is possible to functionalize consciousness, as we have access to a notion of it that is not worried about retaining the intrinsic aspect of consciousness, which is what caused Kim to believe that consciousness could not be functionalized and subsequently halted him from performing a reduction of it. Since we are able to see how there is a notion of consciousness that can be functionalized, we can thus see how it then can be reduced in-line with Kim's theory of reduction. This allows consciousness to be much more tangible for scientists as it allows for them to (1) functionalize consciousness (2) show what underlying processes perform the functions of consciousness and (3) give a theory for how they perform these functions.

However, I do not think that such a view will benefit consciousness in terms of causal power beyond the lower level processes. For the notion of consciousness concerned with the causal aspect, consciousness is reducible to underlying neuronal processes and it would seemingly be impossible for consciousness to have any more causal power than the neuronal processes. With the notion of consciousness concerned with the first person aspect of consciousness, one can simply restate Kim's view of mental causation, as this notion of consciousness seems to be the one that Kim recognizes and uses. However, after making the distinction, it would seem strange that one would use this notion of consciousness in talking about causation, as the other notion of consciousness is the one where causation is the relevant and important feature.

It seems that in applying such a distinction to Kim's theory of reduction and emergence, we come to have a theory of consciousness that is capable of partaking in the best of both worlds. We have one way of talking about consciousness in which consciousness can be the object of scientific discovery and we have another way which preserves the first-person, intrinsic aspect of consciousness. Furthermore, the ability to apply consciousness to Kim's theory of reduction shows a straightforward path that scientists can take in order to provide an accurate depiction of how consciousness and the underlying neuronal processes really match up, which will at least provide for a start on really understanding consciousness.

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