

Week 8a: Seminar Questions on Searle and Churchlands

Focus on the questions 1-5 in small groups (4 or 5 students per group). We will discuss questions 6-7 and any additional comments and questions that arise in the full seminar.

Q1. Searle discusses some central features of consciousness. What are they? Has he left some out? At the end of the first selection, he discusses some common mistakes about consciousness. What are they? Are they mistakes? How does he broaden his Chinese Room argument against computational theory? (p 16 of original). Does the distinction between intrinsic and observer-relative features of reality make sense to you? Can you apply the distinction to some items not mentioned directly in the text?

Q2 Searle believes that his approach to consciousness avoids the traditional mind-body problem? What is his solution (p. 46-47 of original). Does he convincingly dissolve the problem?

Q3 Searle distinguishes two ways to carry out the “scientific investigation” of consciousness: The building block theory (which he criticizes) and the unified field theory which he tentatively embraces. What are these theories and how do they differ? Can you find any “echoes” of one or the other in our previous readings? Does Searle’s account suggest that the “mystery of consciousness” can be dissipated by appropriate science in the same way as the “mystery of life” was dissolved by molecular biology? (p. 10, p 49 ff of the original)

Q4. What is folk psychology (p. 62 of MacFarquhar)? What is Paul Churchland’s view of folk psychology? How much credence should philosophers place in folk psychology as the basis for their ideas? Compare the language of folk psychology and a new language informed by neuroscience (pp. 68-69)—what language do you prefer?

Q5. According to the article, what is Thomas Nagel’s view of consciousness in “What is it like to be a bat?” (pp. 64-65)? How does Nagel’s view differ from the Churchlands’ view of consciousness? Can we understand what it is like to have the consciousness, if any, of some other (nonhuman) organism? Can we understand the consciousness of a human being from a radically different culture than our own? Does an attempt to understand the consciousness of human organisms and nonhuman organisms present the same kind of difficulties?

Q6. According to the article, what is the Churchlands’ approach to philosophy? How is it different from other approaches to philosophy mentioned in the article? How does each group view the aims and methods of philosophy? How is the Churchlands’ approach similar to or different from Searle’s?

Q7. Given our previous readings how do you think that the study of consciousness as described in the readings and this morning’s session relate to the study of language and mind?

Bring one question to the full seminar, generated by your small group.