

Searle on External Realism and “Privileged Conceptual Scheme”

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Abstract: In the paper, I question some of the claims professor Searle makes about external realism, a position I accept. I briefly sum up Searle’s position, and then proceed to the mentioned critique. In particular, the target of my paper is Searle’s claim that external realism is to shun commitment to any particular ontology. I also point out that Searle’s external realism is in some respects difficult to disentangle from ontological constructivism, a position incompatible with external realism. The paper concludes with an apology for the idea of a “Privileged Conceptual Scheme” that Searle views as misguided.

Keywords: John Searle, external realism, constructivism, conceptual relativity, Privileged Conceptual Scheme.

This is an attempt at constructive criticism. Constructive because I subscribe to almost everything Professor Searle has written on realism. Criticism because I do not entirely accept a couple of his claims on the subject and do believe they are in need of a slight revision. Searle is right that a large part of recent literature on realism is vague and confused and that some serious philosophical housekeeping is in order. My aim is to help with the housekeeping in an unambitious, but, I hope, not entirely irrelevant way. I will, first, briefly summarize Searle’s realistic position, and then proceed to the mentioned revision.

1 External realism

Searle unswervingly advocates the thesis of “external” realism (henceforward ER).¹ In a nutshell, the thesis consists in the claim that there is a reality totally independent of our representations – words, beliefs, perceptions, pictures, maps, etc. There are objects, features, facts and states of affairs that are logically independent of our representations: even if we and all our representations ceased to exist, a large part of what there is would continue to exist unaffected. Another important feature of Searle’s ER is the denial that realism is a doctrine committed to any *particular* ontology. External realist is not committed to the existence of any particular kinds of objects, properties, etc., since we “could be mistaken about how the world is in every detail and realism could still be true” (Searle 1995, 155). Searle further postulates that a properly formulated thesis of “conceptual relativism” is acceptable and fully consistent with external realism. In its proper formulation, the thesis just states that we can devise an indefinite number of conceptual schemes for representing what amounts to a single fact or state of affairs. We can measure weight in pounds or kilograms and it makes no sense to claim that only one of these descriptions correctly captures the properties of physical objects. There is no “Privileged Conceptual Scheme” (Searle 1995, 164). Furthermore, each and every one of our representations is always a part of some system of representations (e. g., a conceptual scheme), and since systems of representations are our creations, a degree of convention or arbitrariness always pertains to the actual form the system of representations takes. This convention or arbitrariness is, though, just a feature of our ways of conceiving external reality and does not affect it. Our systems of representations are constructed by us, but what they represent is, in most cases, no construction of ours. Also, the realist according to Searle need not commit herself to the idea of unconceptualized or, more generally, a-representational access to reality. The fact that we use concepts and other representational devices of our own making in no way implies that we are never in touch with external reality.

All representation occurs within a set of representations and within some representational system. Hence, any representation of the rela-

¹ I am going to draw on his 1991 Prague lecture ‘Is there a problem about realism?’ (later published as Searle 1992) and the seventh chapter of his (1995) book on social reality.

tion between the set of representational states and the representational system, on the one hand and the reality represented, on the other, also occurs within some representational system. But so what? It simply does not follow from the fact that all cognition is within a cognitive system that no cognition is ever directly of a reality that exists independently of all cognition (cf. Searle 1995, 174f.).

No “God’s Eye View” on reality is presupposed by the advocates of ER. Finally, ER should be disentangled from any particular theory of truth. Any specific theory of truth, such as correspondence theory, needs a separate defense.²

2 A particular ontology

I’ll start my critical discussion of Searle’s ER with the claim that realists aren’t committed to any particular ontology – that their thesis is just a general commitment to there being *a way things are* that is logically independent of all human representations. Searle’s position contrasts in this respect with the view of another noted realist, Michael Devitt, who defines external realism in the following way: “Tokens of most current common-sense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental” (Devitt 1997, 23). To Devitt, Searle’s definition of ER would be too minimalist. A *scientific* realist, for example, doesn’t just hold that some completely unspecified *something* exists independently of the mental. He holds that *quarks, leptons, mesons*, etc. exist independently of all our representations of them. To say that some unspecified *X* exists independently of representations is uninformative to the point of being completely vacuous. Realism, as I conceive it, is a claim that the world has a certain *structure* which is independent of our representations of it. In other words, the world apart from our representations is not just a totally shapeless blob, a single superentity in which no natural boundaries (“joints”) are to be found. Needless to say, we might be more or less wrong about this structure – about the kinds of objects the universe contains, about their features and relations, laws governing their behavior, etc. But pending a very thoroughgoing scepticism, we have a solid evidence that we are tracking at least some bits of this independent structure. Why not say, then, that realism is a claim

² Such a defense is provided by Searle in the last chapter of his (1995).

that quarks and leptons, trees and rivers exist independently of our representations of them?

Searle would not accept this suggestion, for he presents ER as a completely general claim based on modal considerations. In view of the extreme but logically possible scenario that we get *no* feature of external reality right, we must be, he holds, content with the general thesis: there is *something* out there and it is independent of our representations. Thus, even if the world was, say, completely empty, i. e., contained no physical matter whatsoever, ER would, Searle points out, *still be true*: the external emptiness would still be independent of our representations of it. I grant that. But realism as many people, me including, conceive it, is a thesis about the *actual* world, the only one there really is. *As it happens*, the world does objectively contain a vast number of distinct natural kinds, processes, etc. Should we be content with the fairly vacuous definition of ER provided by Searle or can we accept the more robust version put forward by Devitt? My view is that there's no harm in opting for the latter (though Searle thinks it is a "very deep mistake" to do so – see Searle 1995, 155). It captures the sound intuition that the realist is committed to there being a particular independent structure out there.³ Often we get the structure wrong, but that doesn't imply that we get *no* part of it right. The progress of science, for example, is nothing but a process of getting at ever more precise representations of this independent structure.⁴

My more important misgiving concerning the pallid way Searle delimits ER is the following. Realism is not only opposed to idealism of the days long past. Nowadays the external realist has to deal with *constructivists* – quite a lot of them, actually.⁵ The problem I see in Searle's

³ Hacking (1999, 83) calls realism "inherent-structurism" in order to capture precisely this idea.

⁴ Consider how Searle himself proceeds in his discussion of realism. In (1992) and (1995) he mentions the following worldly specimens: mountains, dogs, cats, stones, trees, water (snow, ice), planets, horses, fleas, hydrogen atoms, electrons and light. Doesn't his realism concern *them*? His ER and a more robust ontological commitment differ only in the level of generality, not in principle. Searle's "a way the world is" is nothing but a generalized version of "mountains, dogs, cats, stones, trees, ...". I do not see why mere opting for a more specific ontology strips me of my realism.

⁵ I address a surprisingly widespread tendency towards ontological constructivism in recent American philosophy in my forthcoming book *Realismus a relativismus* [Realism and Relativism].

ER: there seems to be no way to distinguish it from various versions of ontological constructivism put forward in the literature; and constructivism *negates* realism. The constructivists claim that the world has no intrinsic structure. There is no way it is apart from our descriptions. It is we who divide it up into objects, properties, etc., by means of our representations. I was, to put it mildly, surprised to read the following words in Searle (1995, 160):

The world divides up the way we divide it, and if we are ever inclined to think that our present way of dividing it is the right one, or is somehow inevitable, we can always imagine alternative systems of classification.⁶

This sounds as if the world apart from our representation were just a featureless, shapeless lump that did not contain any specific objects of properties apart from our conceptual interventions. This would be the “world well lost” of Goodman the irrealist (see Goodman 1978, 4). Such a featureless world is, I submit, the price of defining realism as being about some totally unspecific *something*.

The world is structured apart from all our representations. It contains fleas and giraffes, water and aluminum. These objects and substances are parts of it regardless whether we care to devise labels for referring to them or not. On the other hand, take *klurks* (see Searle 1995, 160f.). A klurk is a circle randomly drawn across a portion of a book and a portion of a table the book rests on. My claim is that klurks are no part of nature, since they do not exist apart from humans. They do not form a natural kind. In a humanless world, klurks would not come to exist; fleas, trees and supernovae, though, would still be parts of it. Let me put it like this. Either the world contains dogs, grass and supernovae without humans and their representations, or it doesn't. If it does, we cannot divide it up in any way we please – provided our aim is to describe it correctly. If it doesn't, we may cut it up in any way we like, but then it doesn't really make sense to speak as if there was “a way the world is” apart from our representation; no *brute* facts, as opposed to socially constructed ones (e. g., that my bank account is not entirely empty), are in the offing.

⁶ Searle (1992, 417) speaks, in a similar vein, about “a language-independent reality [that] can be carved out or divided up in different ways, by different vocabularies”.

A realist in my sense is committed to the claim that the world does contain inherent boundaries, that it is not an amorphous lump. If we are lucky enough, we hit upon some of these. But we do not *create* them. Unless realism is to collapse into constructivism, we must be very clear about this. In fact, Searle seems to admit this much. According to his more cautious description of the way we employ language in cognition, we set up criteria for using our terms and *then let the world itself decide that they are empty or not* (see Searle 1995, 166). Note what this implies. The fact that the term “giraffe” does have a reference, i. e., isn’t empty, *is just the fact that the world contains giraffes representation-independently*. Giraffes are denizens of the independent world, parts of its inherent structure. They did not come into being only upon the emergence of the human term “giraffe”. We make descriptions, not worlds (see Searle 1995, 166).

3 Conceptual Relativism and a Privileged Conceptual Scheme

Above I, following Searle, defined conceptual relativism as a thesis to the effect that there may be indefinitely many ways of describing what amounts to the same facts. That is OK, provided we understand it in the right way. “We can measure weight in pounds or kilograms and it makes no sense to claim that only one of them correctly captures the properties of physical objects”, I said earlier. In all the examples of this sort, the different descriptions are *strictly cognitively equivalent*. If one of them is true, the other is true as well, and there is a straightforward way of translating one into the other (and vice versa). Cases of conceptual relativity thus defined contrast sharply with the possibility that “the same statement (not the same sentence but the same statement) could be true of the world in one conceptual system but false of the world in another conceptual system” (Searle 1995, 167). The same portion of the world cannot correctly be described as both *p* and not *p*. ER is compatible with conceptual relativism, but it excludes the latter possibility of alethic relativism, since within the realistic framework, all true descriptions can consistently be affirmed together.

Searle further argues that conceptual relativism undermines the idea of One True Theory of the World, or, in his words, Privileged Conceptual Scheme (henceforward PCS). I confess I am at a loss to see in which way conceptual relativity interferes with PCS idea. What’s wrong with

PCS? I grant that one state of affairs can be described in many different ways. But given these different ways are just *notational variants*, as we have just seen, the idea of CPS can accommodate this fact. A sensible formulation of CPS must allow for differences in alternative descriptions of the same things. But since these differences are always only superficial, we can treat the alternative descriptions simply as different ways of expressing a single PCS.⁷ It seems to me that unless no stronger conceptual relativity is forthcoming, we have no reason to jettison PCS. And I don't know what this stronger relativity could amount to, were it not collapse into the alethic relativism Searle correctly rejects. If Professor Searle finds stronger relativism plausible, he should be a bit more specific about its details.⁸

So far we have seen nothing at all to cause the champions of PCS idea the least bit of unease. But realism, Searle points out, is not a thesis about *descriptions* or conceptual schemes, but a thesis about independent reality. I agree. Notice, though, that if my reasoning above is sound, the realists may commit themselves not just to a completely general way the world is, but to a much more specific ontology – and this ontology calls for a single vocabulary precisely on the lines of the

⁷ Searle seems to grant this much in his talk about a conjunction of an indefinite number of different formulations of the same facts (see Searle 1992, 420). In a more economical vein, we could always take just one of the cognitively equivalent descriptions as a representative of the whole class. This leaves us with a finite, though still a very large set of descriptions conforming to the PCS idea.

⁸ At one place, Searle defines conceptual relativism in a way that sharply contrasts with the "official" definition: "different and even incommensurable vocabularies can be constructed for describing *different aspects of reality* for our various purposes" (Searle 1995, 155; emphasis added). On the official version, the schemes capture the same facts in cognitively equivalent ways. Here, the schemes address different facts by ways which are anything but cognitively equivalent. (I am not quite sure what Searle means by "incommensurable" schemes but at least it is clear that they aren't cognitively equivalent.) So, in plain words, we have one way of describing fact *a*, another, cognitively non-equivalent way for describing fact *b*. But that is only to be expected! We describe human brains in a manner appreciably different from the way we describe the social behavior of ants. All these different, cognitively non-equivalent descriptions of different portions of reality are, if true, simply different bits of the PCS. In fact, the second version of conceptual relativism seems to be no genuine species of relativism (and clearly it doesn't refute PCS).

PCS. There is thus a clear sense to the idea that the world is best described using a single conceptual scheme, though this scheme may be couched in a variety of slightly different terms. Such a scheme, and the particular descriptions made by its means, is privileged in the sense that they correctly capture the independent structure of external reality. Alternative schemes are either easily convertible into it, or not correct (and thus unprivileged).

Searle finds it preposterous to suggest “that reality itself must determine how it should be described” (Searle 1995, 155). On my view, this is precisely what reality is doing. Sure, it does not literally force us to use the very words we are using in describing it. We can describe the world correctly in English or in Chinese. We could adopt a global convention to call atoms “flumps” – nature certainly does not prevent *this*. And, as noted, we can devise novel, cognitively equivalent ways for describing features of the world. But this is where our creativity and convention ends, at least when we subscribe to realism. “Conceptual schemes are human constructions and, to this extent, arbitrary” (Searle 1995, 151). That is certainly true. And it is also true that “any true description is always more or less arbitrarily selected for describing the world” (Searle 1995, 161). But, and this cannot be stressed too much, this arbitrariness is fairly limited.⁹ I think we should resist the picture according to which we craft our concepts on purely arbitrary grounds. Our languages do not shape the external world. The direction of influence is very much the opposite.¹⁰ From the evolutionary point of view, our linguistic and other representational capacities are molded by the inherent structure of our environment. We just don’t carve reality in any way we please.

To summarize, I have been arguing that it is advisable for the realist to prefer ontologically more committed version of realism to Searle’s general and underspecified thesis, mainly in order to steer clear of ontological constructivism and other contemporary intellectual tendencies that Searle (1995, 197) duly finds suspect. My second point is that

⁹ It is more limited in concepts for natural kinds than in concepts used for tracking the physical properties of our surroundings. Degrees of temperature, for example, do not directly correspond to anything in our surroundings, and this seems to be the reason why the different measuring systems emerged. No such conventional differences are to be found in concepts for animals, plants, etc. Here what varies are just their names in different languages.

¹⁰ In this I am in perfect agreement with Donald Davidson (1997, 16f.).

we should be careful not to read too much into Searle’s denial of the Privileged Conceptual Scheme. What Searle denies is a certain literalist reading of the PCS idea which is indeed indefensible. We can, though, embrace a more sensible version of PCS that allows for superficial differences in true descriptions of the same facts. I doubt that when even this sensible version of PCS is denied, we are left with anything recognizable as “external realism”.

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