

I. Searle on the Structure of Consciousness/ Experience

John R. Searle's endeavour in his theory of biological naturalism is to put back the notion of consciousness in the study of the mental phenomena. Consciousness, according to him, occupies the central position in the discourse of the mental. The centrality of consciousness as a constituting factor of mental life not only defines other co-features but also establishes consciousness itself as an intrinsic life property. The logic of consciousness as an intrinsic feature of life reveals its autonomy. As Wittgenstein rightly remarked, "Consciousness is life itself."¹ That is, it has its own independent function. Consciousness as an autonomous principle defines the mental life of human beings. Consciousness as a principle of life can be explained by itself without considering any physicalist explanation of its origin. Thus, in this sense, consciousness is the metaphysical reality that precedes all modes of our understanding. Therefore, we must focus on the genuine understanding of this phenomenon. As Johnston points out, "To understand the concept of consciousness we do not need to define or to describe it, but to recognize what is involved in saying that someone is conscious; what is important is not a description, but an understanding of the significance of the concept."² A concept is understood by seeing the function of the concept in various occasions of its use. So, understanding the notion of consciousness needs to be seen or experienced from various points of view, i.e. both from the *first person point of view* as well as the *third person point of view*. The first person point of view gives an account of the subjective experience of the phenomena, whereas the third person point of view brings forth the intersubjective realisability of the phenomena. That will perhaps result in establishing the objectivity or the reality of consciousness. Searle's biological naturalism brings out the objectivity of consciousness by relating both the points of view. Before going to discuss the objectivity of consciousness we need to see what are the constituting features involved in the structure of consciousness.

The *structure of consciousness* is basically understood in terms of the three main feature of consciousness: intentionality, phenomenality or qualia, and reflexivity, but the Searlean perspective provides a wider view of the structure. According to Searle, there are a dozen structural properties which constitute the structure of consciousness. They are, finite modalities, unity, intentionality, (aboutness), subjective feelings or *qualia*, connection

¹ L.Wittgenstein, *Notebooks: 1914-1916*, second edition, (eds.) G.H. von Wright, G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, p.82.

² He discusses it extensively in the chapter-7 "Mind, the Brain and the Soul", See Paul Johnston, *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner*, Routledge, Oxford, 1993, p.209.

between consciousness and intentionality, (the Background conditions) The Figure-Ground, Gestalt structure of conscious experience, aspect of familiarity, overflow (imagination), the center and periphery of consciousness, boundary conditions, mood, (conditions of satisfaction) the pleasure/ unpleasure dimension. All these features are correlated with each other and together constitute the structure of consciousness.

Finite modalities of consciousness show human beings' awareness of sense experiences and thought processes. Searle says, "Human consciousness is manifested in strictly limited number of modalities. In addition to the five senses of sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing and the sixth the 'sense of balance', there are also bodily sensations and the stream of thought."³ Sense experiences or bodily sensations play a vital role insofar as one's knowledge of feeling pain, listening to music, smelling beautiful fragrance, etc., are concerned. The thought process includes all these and also aspects of imagination, emotions, etc. There is an emotional state when someone is listening to music or creating a new lyric and giving music to it. It results in creating different images in one's mind.

Secondly, consciousness or conscious experiences are always figured in a **unity**. When someone is listening to music, he is aware of all its bits, the pitches on which rhythm is based, the frequencies of the volume, etc. And all these appear to him in an interrelated piece of conscious events. Unity is defined through one's awareness of many things in one's visual or auditory experiences. The unity of consciousness is mainly comprised of two sub units: *horizontal* and *vertical*. Horizontal unity is the organization of conscious experiences through stretches of time. For example, when I am speaking about something or thinking something, in due course I am aware of what I have been stating throughout or what I had started with at the beginning. On the other hand, the conscious experience has a vertical unity when someone is simultaneously aware of the diverse features of conscious states. For example, one can be simultaneously aware of his watching the programme on television and taste of the food, and feeling pain in his leg, etc.⁴

Thirdly, most of our conscious experiences are **intentional**: "For large number of cases, the consciousness is indeed a consciousness of something, and the "of" in "consciousness of" is the 'of' of intentionality."⁵ Our conscious experiences are always *about* something, i.e. whenever we are conscious we are conscious *of* something. So there is an *aboutness* or *directedness* involved in the form of conscious experiences. And the

³ Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, p.128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.130-131.

representation of these conscious experiences reveal the *intentional* feature of the states. For Searle, all our conscious experiences are not intentional in the sense that there may be conscious experiences which are not about anything particular. For instance, one's feeling of sudden joy may not have any cause and thereby the person may not be able to cite the intentional referent of his happiness.

These conscious experiences vary from person to person. There is a **subjective feeling** attached to one's conscious experience. We see varieties of things in the world, but whenever we see them we see them from our *point of view*. That is, each one of us sees the things from a different perspective. Searle writes, "My experiences, unlike the objects of the experiences, are always perspectival. They are always from a point of view. But objects themselves have no point of view. Perspective and point of view are most obvious for vision, but of course they are features of our other sensory experiences as well."⁶ Moreover, seeing the things as something and associating a subjective feeling with conscious experiences are unique to conscious beings. For example, a gardener, a poet and a botanist will have different perspectives and feelings when they watch the roses in a garden.

There is a **conceptual connection** between consciousness and intentionality. We are not always conscious of all our mental states. Some are therefore called unconscious mental states and some are called conscious mental states. The person's present awareness of his mental states and the other experiences seem to have intentionality. It is also true in the case of unconscious mental states. Searle says, "The claim is this: only a being that could have conscious intentional states could have intentional states at all, and every unconscious intentional state is at least potentially conscious."⁷ In other words, both conscious mental states and unconscious mental states are in principle conscious and thereby can be called intentional, because they are potentially conscious. Hence, there is a temporal gap between potency and manifestation. One is aware of some mental states at present. These get the mental states manifested in consciousness whereas the unconscious states only carry the potency to get manifested.

Our conscious experiences always figure against a **background**. This is more evident in visual experiences. For example, whenever I see my books, I see them lying on the table. Here table is the background of my seeing books. The same table I find in the background of the wall and the floor on which it is resting. On the other hand, when I see my study room, I

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.132.

find it as a part of our house. Then the house becomes the background for everything there is in the house.

In most of our conscious experiences **familiarity** plays a specific role especially in the case of recognition. Moreover, we are all familiar with our own environmental situations; if not already familiar, we try to become more and more familiar as we get more and more acquainted with it. Familiarity as a feature of consciousness grows or develops by constantly living in same environment. It establishes a close link between a person and his environment or the world. Searle says, “The aspects of familiarity comes in varying degrees; it is a scalar phenomenon. At the top of the familiarity scale are the objects, scenes, people and sights of my ordinary, everyday life. Lower down are strange scenes in which the objects and people are nonetheless easily recognizable and categorizable by me.”⁸ Familiarity not only helps in recognizing things but it develops a sort of likingness towards the things as well. The likingness is part of constant seeing of things from a particular perspective or point of view. And that comes on the higher or top order categorization of the familiarity conditions. Whereas in the lower down categorization of familiarity the person does not want that things should happen in diverse perspectives.

However, there is an **overflow** of consciousness over certain of our conscious experiences. It signifies a person’s emotional bond with the environment and particularly it refers to the imaginary aspects of thoughts. The content of a piece of conscious experience can be extended in the imagination in various ways. For instance, when a poet is writing a poem he is so much impressed by the beauty of the scene that there is an overflow of thoughts which enriches the poem. It shows the emotional linkage or that is, how the person is being affected by seeing the sight or how the person *experiences* the sight.

Sometimes we are conscious of everything that we see in a particular sight. A sight as a field of conscious experience has many things in it. Searle says, “Within the field of consciousness, we need to distinguish between those things that are at the center of our attention and those that are at the periphery. We are conscious of a very large number of things that we are not attending to or focusing our attention upon.”⁹ Our awareness or consciousness of certain things in the field of consciousness is called the **center** of our conscious experience. It is because attention is focused on those things. Others things though

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.135.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.138.

existing in the same field of experience are not consciously attended to. They can be called the **periphery** of one's experiences.

Human conscious life is bound by a *spatio-temporal-socio-biological location*. Searle calls it the **boundary condition**, which a person unconsciously takes for granted. He remarks, "In the course of reflecting about the present, I have at no point had any thoughts concerning where I am located, what day of the month it is, what time of year it is, how long it is since I had breakfast, what my name and past history are, which country I am a citizen of, and so on. Yet it seems to me, all of these are part of the situatedness, part of the spatio-temporal-socio-biological location of my present conscious states. Any state of consciousness is in that way characteristically located. But the location may itself not be at all the object of consciousness, not even at the periphery."¹⁰ A being consciously participates in various activities. But the location in which he is *participating* and in which his conscious life is situated is obviously taken for granted. He never doubts his biological or social situatedness, and he need not have to assert consciously his *existence*. Existence is a part of *spatio-temporal-socio-biological* history. Rather, he is conscious about what he *does* in the society as a conscious or intelligent being.

We have said that some conscious states are not intentional. Their nonintentionality is not because they don't possess directedness but because they do not have a proper *direction of fit* or any object of directedness. Thus, there is no condition of satisfaction. Direction of fit results in bringing my intention into realization. When someone is making a request or passing an order, if his request or order is effectively carried out then it results in a condition of satisfaction. Thus the content of representation is determined partially by the intentional **mood** of the person. Searle says, "I mentioned earlier that often we have moods that are not themselves intentional, though they are conscious. I can be in an elated mood or a depressed mood, a cheerful mood or a downcast mood, these need not be consciously directed at any intentional condition of satisfaction. A mood, by itself, never constitutes the whole content of a conscious state. Rather the mood provides the tone or colour that characterizes the whole of conscious states or sequence of conscious states."¹¹ Human beings are always in some mood or other and all need not be intentional because they do not necessarily determine the direction of fit. However, since human conscious life is always found in some mood. Moods are part of our conscious experience.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.140.

The intention of human beings' conscious activities has two different dimensions known as **pleasure and unpleasure dimension**. Searle states, "Remember that we are considering the whole of conscious states, a slice out of the stream of consciousness big enough to have the unity and coherence I am trying to describe. For such a chunk, it seems to me there is always a dimension of pleasure and unpleasure."¹² Pleasure and unpleasure are the consequential contents of my representational states. These dimensions are the effect of the representation of our conscious activities. Furthermore, there are subdivisions of these two dimensions, which are irritation, happiness, disgust, pain, etc. We often get irritated when our intention is not fulfilled, but if it's effective and fulfilled, we feel happy. Thus the condition of satisfaction is the basic feature of representation of mental states, precisely because it determines the representational intention of the person.

These constitutive features of consciousness not only explain the structure of consciousness but also explain the very function of consciousness. The significance of the function is revealed through two levels of its operation. I would call it internal level and external level. The internal level function of consciousness reveals how there is a conceptual link between conscious and unconscious mental states and their function in the whole network of mental states. This is otherwise known as *conscious thought processing* or thinking. Moreover, the determination of the intentional content of representation shows that there is *unity* of conscious thought processing. These are fully part of the conscious activities of the internal aspects of the mental life. On the other hand, the external aspect shows the conscious activities of being in the world, that is, how a person behaves intelligently in the social framework. Thus, consciousness as *a system feature* gets manifested in conscious activities. Consciousness, however, does not separate these two aspects logically. Rather it establishes the strong link between them. Every conscious activity presupposes thinking. And thoughts are represented in actions.

Consciousness is thus treated as the foundation of the structure of mental life. The notion of consciousness is foundational to the Cartesian philosophy of mind. It is the metaphysical presupposition of the distinction between mind and matter. For Descartes, consciousness is the deep reality and there is nothing beyond. Now the question arises: Does Searle hold the Cartesian notion of consciousness as valid or not? For Searle, consciousness is real and is to be treated as the most fundamental reality. It is presupposed by all dispositions of our mental life. In this sense he is close to Descartes. As Rosenthal points out,

¹² *Ibid.*, p.141.

“Any attempt to explain consciousness by formulating a necessary and sufficient condition for a mental state to be conscious will thus automatically fail. If consciousness is already built into mentality, any such explanation will be uninformative. If not, then, on the present view, the concept of mind on which our explanation of consciousness is based will unavoidably be radically defective.”¹³ We are thus aware of the reality of consciousness from the ontological point of view. This is, the awareness is confirmed by reflexivity, or introspection, which is very much a feature of consciousness. Introspection is taken as the means of knowing mental states. In this regard it does not really explain consciousness.

¹³ David Rosenthal, “Two Types of Consciousness,” *The Philosophical Studies*, Vol.49, 1986, p.330.