Mind: A Brief Introduction

John R. Searle

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Mind

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2004

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Oxford New York
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Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City
Mumbai Nairobi São Paolo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Searle, John R.
Mind: a brief introduction/by John R. Searle
p. cm.—(Fundamentals of Philosophy)
ISBN 0-19-515733-8
1. Philosophy of Mind.
I. Title.
II. Fundamentals of philosophy (Oxford, England).
B.418.3.542004
128'.2—dc22 2004049546

Book design by planettheo.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Dagmar

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Acknowledgments

Most of the material in this book has been given by me in lectures at Berkeley, and I am indebted to my students for their combination of enthusiasm and skepticism. Two of them, Hua (Linda) Ding and Nadia Taylor, read the entire manuscript and made helpful comments. For help in preparing the electronic text I am also grateful to Maria Francisca Reines, Jessica Samuels, and Jing Fong Williams Ying. I received valuable philosophical advice from Janet Broughton, Josef Moural, Axel Seeman, and Marga Vega. The two readers for Oxford University Press, David Chalmers and an anonymous reader, made many helpful comments. I thank my research assistant, Jennifer Hudin for assistance throughout, from the early formulation of the ideas to the final preparation of the index. Most of all, I thank my wife Dagmar Searle for her constant advice and support, and I dedicate this book to her.

Mind

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INTRODUCTION

Why I Wrote This Book

There are many recent introductory books on the philosophy of mind. Several give a more or less comprehensive survey of the main positions and arguments currently in the field. Some, indeed, are written with great clarity, rigor, intelligence, and scholarship. What then is my excuse for adding another book to this glut? Well, of course, any philosopher who has worked hard on a subject is unlikely to be completely satisfied with somebody else's writings on that same subject, and I suppose that I am a typical philosopher in this respect. But in addition to the usual desire for wanting to state my disagreements, there is an overriding reason for my wanting to write a general introduction to the philosophy of mind. Almost all of the works that I have read accept the same set of historically inherited categories for describing mental phenomena, especially consciousness, and with these categories a certain set of assumptions about how consciousness and other mental phenomena relate to each other and to the rest of the world. It is this set of categories, and the assumptions that the

categories carry like heavy baggage, that is completely unchallenged and that keeps the discussion going. The different positions then are all taken within a set of mistaken assumptions. The result is that the philosophy of mind is unique among contemporary philosophical subjects, in that all of the most famous and influential theories are false. By such theories I mean just about anything that has "ism" in its name. I am thinking of dualism, both property dualism and substance dualism, materialism, physicalism, computationalism, functionalism, behaviorism, epiphenomenalism, cognitivism, eliminativism, pan psychism, dual-aspect theory, and emergentism, as it is standardly conceived. To make the whole subject even more poignant, many of these theories, especially dualism and materialism, are trying to say something true. One of my many aims is to try to rescue the truth from the overwhelming urge to falsehood. I have attempted some of this task in other works, especially *The Rediscovery of the Mind*,[1] but this is my only attempt at a comprehensive introduction to the entire subject of the philosophy of mind.

Now what exactly are these assumptions and why are they false? I cannot tell you that just yet. They do not admit of a quick summary without some preliminary work. The first half of this book is in large part about exposing and overcoming those assumptions. It is hard to summarize them because we lack a neutral vocabulary in which to describe mental phenomena. So I have to begin by appealing to your experiences. Suppose you are sitting at a table thinking about the contemporary political situation, about what is going on in Washington, London, and Paris. You turn your attention to this book and you read up to this

point. Here I suggest that, to get a feel for the assumptions, you try pinching your left forearm with your right hand. And suppose you do this intentionally. That is, we will suppose your intention causes the movement of your right hand to pinch your left arm. At this point you will experience a mild pain. This pain has the following more or less obvious features. It exists only insofar as it is consciously experienced, and thus it is in one sense of the words entirely "subjective" and not "objective." Furthermore, there is a certain qualitative feel to the pain. So, the conscious pain has at least these two features: subjectivity and qualitativeness.

I want all of this to sound rather innocent, even boring. So far you have had three types of conscious experiences: thinking about something, intentionally doing something, and feeling a sensation. What is the problem? Well, now look at the objects around you, the chairs and tables, houses and trees. These objects are not in any sense "subjective." They exist entirely independent of whether or not they are experienced. Furthermore, we know independently that they are entirely made of the particles described by atomic physics, and that there is no qualitative feel to being a physical particle, or for that matter being a table. They are parts of the world that exist apart from experiences. Now this simple contrast between our experiences and the world that exists independently of our experiences invites a characterization, and in our traditional vocabulary the most natural characterization is to say is that there is a distinction between the mental, on the one hand, and the physical or material, on the other. The mental qua mental is not physical. And the physical qua physical is not mental. It is this simple picture that leads to

many of the problems, and our three harmless-looking examples exemplify three of the worst problems. How can conscious experiences like your pain exist in a world that is entirely composed of physical particles and how can some physical particles, presumably in your brain cause the mental experiences? (This is called the "mind-body problem.") But even if we got a solution to that problem, we still would not be out of the woods because the next obvious question is, How can the subjective, insubstantial, nonphysical mental states of consciousness ever cause anything in the physical world? How can your intention, not a part of the physical world, ever cause the movement of your arm? (This is called the "problem of mental causation.") Finally your thoughts about politics raise a third intractable problem. How can your thoughts, presumably in your head, refer to or be about distant objects and states of affairs, political events occurring in Washington, London or Paris, for example? (This is called the "problem of intentionality," where "intentionality" means the directedness or aboutness of the mind.)

Our innocent experiences invited a description; and our traditional vocabulary of "mental" and "physical" is hard to resist. This traditional vocabulary assumes the mutual exclusion of the mental and physical; and that assumption creates insoluble problems that have launched a thousand books. People who accept the reality and irreducibility of the mental tend to think of themselves as dualists. But to others, accepting an irreducible mental component in reality seems like giving up on the scientific world-view, so they deny the existence of any such mental reality. They think it can all be reduced to the material or eliminated altogether. They tend to think of themselves as

materialists. I think both sides are making the same mistake.

I am going to try to overcome the vocabulary and the assumptions, and in so doing I am going to try to solve or dissolve the traditional problems. But once we do that, the subject, the philosophy of mind, does not end: it gets more interesting. And this is my second reason for wanting to write this book. Most of the general introductions to the subject are just about the Big Questions. They concentrate mainly on the mind-body problem with some attention also devoted to the problem of mental causation and a lesser amount to the problem of intentionality. I do not think these are the only interesting questions in the philosophy of mind. With the big questions out of the way, we can answer the more interesting and neglected set of questions: how does it work in detail?

Specifically, it seems to me we need to investigate questions about the detailed structure of consciousness, and the significance of recent neurobiological research on this subject. I devote an entire chapter to these questions. With the philosophical puzzle about the possibility of intentionality answered, we can then go on to examine the actual structure of human intentionality. Furthermore, there are a series of absolutely fundamental questions that we have to get clear about before we can think that we understand the operation of the mind at all. They are more than I can cover in a single book, but I do devote a chapter each to the problem of the freedom of the will, the actual operation of mental causation, the nature and functioning of the unconscious, the analysis of perception, and the concept of the self. In an introductory book I cannot go into too much detail, but I can at least give you a feel for

the richness of the subject matter, a richness that is lost in the usual ways of dealing with this subject in introductory books.

There are two distinctions that I want you to be clear about at the very beginning, because they are essential for the argument and because the failure to understand them has led to massive philosophical confusion. The first is the distinction between those features of a world that are observer independent and those that are observer dependent or observer relative. Think of the things that would exist regardless of what human beings thought or did. Some such things are force, mass, gravitational attraction, the planetary system, photosynthesis, and hydrogen atoms. All of these are observer independent in the sense that their existence does not depend on human attitudes. But there are lots of things that depend for their existence on us and our attitudes. Money, property, government, football games, and cocktail parties are what they are, in large part, because that's what we think they are. All of these are observer relative or observer dependent. In general, the natural sciences deal with observer-independent phenomena, the social sciences with the observer dependent. Observer-dependent facts are created by conscious agents, but the mental states of the conscious agents that create observer-dependent facts are themselves observer-independent mental states. Thus the piece of paper in my hand is only money because I and others regard it as money. Money is observer dependent. But the fact that we regard it as money is not itself observer dependent. It is an observer-independent fact about us that I and others regard this as money.

Where the mind is concerned we also need a distinction between original or intrinsic intentionality on the one hand and derived intentionality on the other. For example I have in my head *information* about how to get to San Jose. I have a set of true *beliefs* about the way to San Jose. This information and these beliefs in me are examples of original or intrinsic intentionality. The map in front of me also contains information about how to get to San Jose, and it contains symbols and expressions that *refer to* or are *about* or *represent* cities, highways, and the like. But the sense in which the map contains intentionality in the form of information, reference, aboutness, and representations is derived from the original intentionality of the map makers and users. Intrinsically the map is just a sheet of cellulose fibers with ink stains on it. Any intentionality it has is imposed on it by the original intentionality of humans.

So there are two distinctions to keep in mind, first between observer-independent and observer-dependent phenomena, and second between original and derived intentionality. They are systematically related: derived intentionality is always observer-dependent.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Dozen Problems in the Philosophy of Mind

The aim of this book is to introduce the reader to the philosophy of mind. I have three objectives. First, the reader should get an understanding of the most important contemporary issues and discussions in this field, and also get some understanding of their historical background. Second, I want to make clear what I think is the correct way to approach these problems, and I even hope to provide answers to many of the questions I pose. And third, most important of all, I would like the reader to be able to think about these issues for himself or herself after reading the book. I can state all of these aims at once by saying that I am trying to write the book that I wish I had read when I first began to think about these questions. I write out of the conviction that the philosophy of mind is the most important subject in contemporary philosophy and that the standard views—dualism, materialism,

behaviorism, functionalism, computationalism, eliminativism, epiphenomenalism—are false.

One agreeable feature of writing about the mind is that it is not necessary to explain why the subject is important. It takes a while to see that illocutionary acts and quantified modal logic are important subjects in philosophy, but everyone can see immediately that the mind is central to our life. The operation of the mind—conscious and unconscious, free and unfree, in perception, action, and thought, in feeling, emotions, reflection, and memory, and in all its other features—is not so much an aspect of our lives, but in a sense, it is our life.

There are risks in writing such a book: among the worst things we can do is to give readers the impression that they understand something they do not really understand, that something has been explained when it has not been explained, and that a problem has been solved when it has not been solved. I am acutely aware of all these risks, and in what follows I will be emphasizing areas of human ignorance—my own as well as others'—as much as areas of human understanding. I think that the philosophy of mind is so important that it is worth taking these risks. For a number of important historical reasons, the philosophy of mind has become the central topic in contemporary philosophy. For most of the twentieth century the philosophy of language was "first philosophy." Other branches of philosophy were seen as derived from the philosophy of language and dependent on results in the philosophy of language for their solution. The center of attention has now moved from language to mind. Why? Well, first, I think many of us working in the philosophy of language see many of the questions of language as special cases of questions

about the mind. Our use of language is an expression of our more biologically fundamental mental capacities, and we will not fully understand the functioning of language until we see how it is grounded in our mental abilities. A second reason is that with the growth of knowledge we have seen a movement away from treating the theory of knowledge, epistemology, as central in philosophy and we are now prepared to do a more substantive, theoretical, constructive philosophy, rather than just dealing piecemeal with specific traditional problems. The ideal place to begin that constructive philosophy is to start by examining the nature of the human mind. A third reason for the centrality of the mind is that, for many of us, myself included, the central question in philosophy at the beginning of the twenty-first century is how to give an account of ourselves as apparently conscious, mindful, free, rational, speaking, social, and political agents in a world that science tells us consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, physical particles. Who are we, and how do we fit into the rest of the world? How does the human reality relate to the rest of reality? One special form of this question is, What does it mean to be human? The answers to these questions have to begin with a discussion of the mind, because mental phenomena form the bridge by which we connect with the rest of the world. A fourth reason for the preeminence of the philosophy of mind has been the invention of "cognitive science," a new discipline that attempts to go deeper into the nature of the mind than was customary in traditional empirical psychology. Cognitive science requires a foundation in the philosophy of mind. Finally, more controversially, I think the philosophy of language has reached a period of relative stagnation because of certain

common mistakes that surround the doctrine of so-called externalism, the idea that the meanings of words, and by extension the contents of our minds, are not inside our heads, but are matters of causal relations between what is in our heads and the external world. This is not the place to rehearse those issues in detail, but the failures to give an account of language on an externalist premise have led to a fallow period in the philosophy of language; and the philosophy of mind has taken up the slack. I will say more about externalism in chapter 6.

The philosophy of mind has a special feature that distinguishes it from other branches of philosophy. In most philosophical subjects there is no sharp division between what the professionals believe and the opinions of the educated general public. But on the issues discussed in this book, there is an enormous difference between what most people believe and what the professional experts believe. I suppose most people in the Western world today accept some form of dualism. They believe they have both a mind, or a soul, and a body. I have even heard some people tell me they have three parts—a body, a mind, and a soul. But this is definitely not the view of the professionals in philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, neurobiology, or artificial intelligence. Almost without exception, the professional experts in the field accept some version of materialism. A great deal of effort in this book will be devoted to trying to explain these issues and solve the attendant problems.

Let us suppose then that the mind is now the central topic in philosophy and that other questions, such as the nature of language and meaning, the nature of society, and the nature of knowledge are all in one way or another

special cases of the more general characteristics of the human mind, How should we proceed to examine the mind?

I. DESCARTES AND OTHER DISASTERS

In philosophy there is no escaping history. Ideally, I sometimes think, I would just like to tell my students the truth about a question and send them home. But such a totally unhistorical approach tends to produce philosophical superficiality. We have to know how it came about historically that we have the questions we do and what sorts of answers our ancestors gave to these questions. The philosophy of mind in the modern era effectively begins with the work of René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes was not the first person to hold views of the kind he did, but his view of the mind was the most influential of the so-called modern philosophers, the philosophers of the seventeenth century, and after. Many of his views are routinely expounded, and uncritically accepted today by people who cannot even pronounce his name. Descartes' most famous doctrine is dualism, the idea that the world divides into two different kinds of *substances* or entities that can exist on their own. These are mental substances and physical substances. Descartes' form of dualism is sometimes called "substance dualism."[1]

Descartes thought that a substance has to have an essence or an essential trait that makes it the kind of substance that it is (all this jargon about substance and essence, by the way, comes from Aristotle). The essence of mind is consciousness, or as he called it "thinking"; and the essence of body is being extended in three

dimensions in physical space, or as he called it "extension." By saying that the essence of the mind is consciousness, Descartes is claiming that we are the sort of beings we are because we are conscious, and that we are always in some conscious state or other and would cease to exist if we ceased to be in some conscious state. For example, right now my mind is concentrating consciously on writing the first chapter of this book, but whatever changes I go through when I stop writing and, for example, start eating dinner, I will still continue to be in some conscious state or other. In saying that the essence of body is extension, Descartes is claiming that bodies have spatial dimensions: the desk in front of me, the planet Earth, and the car in the parking lot are all extended or spread out in space. In Descartes' Latin terminology the distinction is between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. (Descartes' name, by the way is a contraction of "Des Cartes," Latin: "Cartesius," meaning of the cards; and the corresponding English adjective is "Cartesian")

Cartesian dualism was important in the seventeenth century for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that it seemed to divide up the territory between science and religion. In the seventeenth century the new scientific discoveries seemed to pose a threat to traditional religion and there were terrific disputes about the apparent conflict between faith and reason. Descartes partly, although not entirely, defused this conflict by, in effect, giving the material world to the scientists and the mental world to the theologians. Minds were considered to be immortal souls and not a proper topic of scientific investigations, whereas bodies could be investigated by such sciences as biology, physics, and astronomy. Philos-

ophy, by the way, he thought could study both mind and body.

According to Descartes, each essence has different modes or modifications in which it can occur. Bodies are infinitely divisible. That is, they can in principle be divided up indefinitely into smaller pieces, and in this sense each body can be destroyed, though matter in general cannot be destroyed. The amount of matter in the universe is constant. Minds, on the other hand, are indivisible, that is, they cannot be divided into smaller pieces, and thus they cannot be destroyed in the way that bodies can. Each mind is an immortal soul. Bodies, as physical entities, are determined by the laws of physics; but minds have free will. Each of us as a self is identical with his or her mind. As living human beings we are composite entities, comprising both a mind and a body, but for each of us the self, the object referred to by "I," is a mind that is somehow attached to our body. Gilbert Ryle, a twentieth-century philosopher of mind, sneered at this aspect of Descartes' view by calling it the doctrine of "the ghost in the machine." Each of us is a ghost (our mind) inhabiting a machine (our body).[2] We know both the existence and the contents of our minds by a kind of immediate awareness, which Descartes summarizes in the most famous sentence of his philosophy, "*Cogito ergo sum*": I think therefore I exist. This looks like a formal argument with "I think" as premise and "I exist" as conclusion, but I believe that Descartes intended it also to record a kind of inner inspection of the existence and the contents of the mind. I cannot be mistaken about the existence of my own consciousness, hence I cannot be mistaken about my own existence, because it is my essence to be a conscious (that is, thinking) being, a mind. Nor can

I be mistaken about the contents of my mind. If it seems to me, for example, that I have a pain, then I do have a pain.

Bodies, on the other hand, cannot be known directly but only indirectly by inferring their existence and features from the contents of the mind. I do not directly perceive the table in front of me; but, strictly speaking, I perceive only my conscious experience of the table, my "idea" of the table; and I infer the existence of the table from the presence of the idea. My present idea of the table is not caused by me, so I have to assume that it is caused by the table.

Descartes' account of the relationship between mind and body can be summarized in the accompanying chart. In addition to having an essence each substance has a series of modifications or properties, and these are the particular forms that the essence takes.

	Substances	
	Mind	Body
Essence	Thinking (consciousness)	Extension (having spatial dimensions)
Properties	Known directly Free Indivisible Indestructible	Known indirectly Determined Infinitely divisible Destructible

Descartes' views have led to endless debates and it is fair to say that he left us with more problems than solutions. The account that I just gave you, brief as it was, of reality as dividing into the mental and the physical, leaves us with a bushel of problems of which here are eight that most concerned Descartes himself and his immediate successors.

1. The Mind-Body Problem

What exactly are the relations between the mental and the physical, and in particular how can there be causal relations between them? It seems impossible that there should be causal relations between two completely different metaphysical realms, the physical realm of extended material objects and the mental or spiritual realm of minds or souls. How does anything in the body cause anything in the mind? How does anything in the mind cause anything in the body? Yet, it seems we know that there are causal relations. We know that if somebody steps on my toe, I feel a pain even though his stepping on my toe is just a physical event in the physical world, and my feeling of pain is a mental event that occurs inside my soul. How can such things happen? Just as bad: it seems there are causal relations going the other way as well. I decide to raise my arm, an event that occurs inside my conscious soul, and, lo and behold, my arm goes up. How are we supposed to think that such a thing could ever happen? How can a decision in my soul cause a movement of a physical object in the world such as my body? This is the most famous problem that Descartes left us, and it is usually called the "mind-body problem." How can there be causal relations between the two? Much of the philosophy of mind after Descartes is concerned with this problem, and it is still, in spite of all of our progress over the centuries, a leading problem in contemporary philosophy. I believe it has a fairly obvious general philosophical solution, which I shall explain later; but I have to tell you in advance that many—maybe most—of my colleagues are strongly in disagreement with my claim that we have a ready solution to Descartes' problem.

There are really two sets of problems. How can anything physical produce an effect inside my soul, which is nonphysical, and how can events in my soul affect the physical world. In the past century and a half the first of these questions has been transformed in a way that Descartes would not have accepted. In its modern version, the question is, How can brain processes produce mental phenomena at all? How can brains cause minds? Descartes did not think such a thing was possible, because on his account minds have an existence completely independent of the brain. The problem for Descartes was not the *general* question of how a mental substance can arise out of neurobiology, because for him it cannot. His question was rather how *specific* mental contents such as feeling a pain can arise from the impact of an injury to my body. We think the very existence of a mind is explained by the operations of the brain. Descartes did not think that was possible. For him the question was only how *specific* thoughts and feelings, such as a sensation of pain, can be caused by events occurring to the body.

It is important to emphasize this point: we tend to think, even the dualists among us, that our bodies with their brains are conscious. Descartes did not think that. He thought bodies and brains could no more be conscious than tables or chairs or houses, or any other hunk of junk. Conscious souls are separate, though somehow attached to human bodies. But no material object, living or dead, is conscious.

2. The Problem of Other Minds

I said that according to Descartes each of us is a mind and that each of us knows the contents of his or her mind directly, but how do I know that other people have minds?

What makes me confident, when, for example, I meet you, that you have a mind? After all, all I can observe is your body, including its physical movements and the sounds that come out of its mouth that I interpret as words. But how do I know that there is anything behind all these physical phenomena? How do I know that you have a mind when the only mind that I have direct knowledge of is my own mind?

We might think that I can infer the existence of mental states in you by analogy with myself. Just as I observe in my own case a correlation between input stimulus, inner mental state, and output behavior; so in your case, because I can observe the input stimulus and the output behavior, I infer by analogy that you must have an inner mental state corresponding to mine. Thus, if I hit my thumb with a hammer, the input stimulus causes me to feel a pain, which in turn causes me to cry out. In your case, so the story goes, I observe the input stimulus and the crying out, and I simply plug in the gap by making an analogy between you and me.

This is a famous argument, called the "argument from analogy." But it doesn't work. In general, it is a requirement on inferential knowledge that if the knowledge claim is to be valid, there must be, in principle, some independent or noninferential way to check the inference. Thus, if I think that there is someone in the next room by inferring her presence from sounds that I hear, I can always go in the next room and check on this inference to see if there really is someone in the next room causing the sounds. But if I make an inference from your stimulus and your behavior to your mental state, how can I ever check the inference? How can I ever see that I am correctly inferring and not just making a wild guess? If I take it to be a kind of scientific hypothesis that we test by scientific methods, whether or not you have

mental states corresponding to your observable stimulus and response patterns, in the same way that I have mental states corresponding to my stimulus and response patterns, then it seems that what the argument proves is that I am the only person in the world that has any mental states at all. Thus, for example, if I ask everybody in the room to put their thumbs on a desk and I go around pounding each thumb with a hammer to see which ones, if any, hurt; it turns out that as far as I can observe there is only one thumb that hurts: this one, the one I call mine. But when I hit the other thumbs, there is no feeling at all.

The view that I am the only person who has mental states is called "solipsism." Solipsism comes in at least three different grades. One, the most extreme form: I am the only person in the world who has mental states; and indeed in some forms, nothing exists in the world except my mental states. Two, epistemic solipsism: maybe other people have mental states, but I can never know for sure. It is quite possible that they do but I have no way of finding out, because all I can observe is their external behavior. And three: Other people do have mental states, but I can never be sure that they are like mine. For all I know, what I call "seeing red," if you could have that very experience you might call it "seeing green," and if I could have your experience that you call "seeing red" I would call it "seeing green." We both pass the same color blindness tests because we both make the same discriminations in our behavior. If asked to pick out the green pencil from a box of red pencils, we both pick the same pencil. But how do I know that the inner experiences you have that enable you to discriminate are similar to the ones I have that enable me to discriminate?

Solipsism is unusual in the history of philosophy in that there are no famous solipsists. Just about every conceivable crazy philosophical position has been held by some famous philosopher or other, but, as far as I know, no famous historical philosophers have ever been solipsists. Of course, if anyone were a solipsist it would hardly be worth his or her time to tell us that they were solipsists, because on their theory we don't exist.*

Solipsism also involves a peculiar asymmetry in that your solipsism is no threat to me, and my solipsism, if I am tempted to solipsism, cannot be refuted by you. So, for example, if you come to me and say, "I am a solipsist. You don't exist." I do not feel the temptation to think, "Gosh, maybe he's right, maybe I don't exist." But, correspondingly, if I am tempted to solipsism, it is no good my going to you and asking, "Do you exist? Do you really have mental states?" Because anything you say will still be consistent with the hypothesis of solipsism.

3. The Problem of Skepticism about the External World and 4. The Analysis of Perception

The skepticism about other minds that follows from Cartesian dualism is just a special case of a much more general

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* Bertrand Russell writes:

> As against solipsism it is to be said, in the first place, that it is psychologically impossible to believe, and is rejected in fact even by those who mean to accept it. I once received a letter from an eminent logician, Mrs. Christine Ladd Franklin, saying that she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others.

Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), 180.

kind of skepticism: skepticism about the existence of the external world. On Descartes' view all I can have certain knowledge of are the contents of my own mind, my actual thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and so on. But what about the chairs and tables and mountains and rivers and forests and trees that I see around me? Do I have secure knowledge that they really exist and that I am perceiving them as they really are? It is important to understand that on Descartes' view we do not directly perceive objects and states of affairs in the world. What we directly perceive, that is, perceive without any inferential processes, are the contents of our own minds. So if I hold up my hand in front of my face, what I directly perceive, what I strictly and literally perceive, according to Descartes, is a certain visual experience that I am having. Descartes calls these experiences "ideas." I perceive not the hand in itself, but rather a certain visual representation of the hand, a kind of mental picture of the hand. But then the question arises, How do I know there really is a hand out there on the other side causing me to have this mental picture? Because I do not perceive the hand itself but only a mental representation of the hand, the question arises, How do I know that the representation really represents, or represents accurately? Descartes' view was common in the seventeenth century. It is called the "representative theory of perception," and I am going to tell you more about it later, but I want to point out at this stage that a problem for Descartes is, How can we really be sure? How can we have certain and secure knowledge that there is an object out there that is causing me to have this visual experience, and that the visual experience is in any respect an accurate representation of the real features of the object?

Descartes presents very little by way of an argument to

show that we cannot directly perceive tables, chairs, mountains, etc. but can only perceive our ideas of these things. He makes the transition from perceiving real objects to perceiving only the contents of our own minds very casually. Though he was by no means the first philosopher to hold this view, the move from the view that we really perceive real objects to the view that we only perceive our ideas of objects is a move of decisive importance in the history of philosophy. Indeed, I would say it is the greatest single disaster in the history of philosophy over the past four centuries. In contemporary jargon, it is put by saying: we do not perceive material objects, we perceive only "sense data." I will have much more to say about this issue in chapter 10.

There are really two closely related problems. The first is, How do we give an analysis of our perceptual interactions with the world? What exactly is the relationship between our inner perceptual experiences, on the one hand, and material objects and other features of the external world, on the other? The second is, How can we ever be sure that we have knowledge of the external world that is on the other side of our perceptual experiences? The two are closely related because we would like our analysis of perception of the external world to provide us with the tools for answering skepticism about the possibility of having knowledge of the external world.

5. The Problem of Free Will

I have experiences of making up my own mind, of deciding between genuine alternatives, and of doing one thing, when I could easily have done something else. These are manifestations of what I take to be my own freedom of the will. But