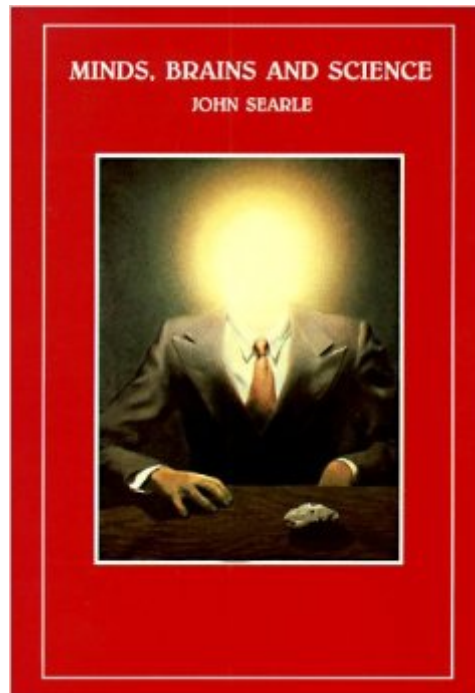


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Minds, Brains And Science (1984 Reith Lectures)



Synopsis

Minds, Brains and Science takes up just the problems that perplex people, and it does what good philosophy always does: it dispels the illusion caused by the specious collision of truths. How do we reconcile common sense and science? Searle argues vigorously that the truths of common sense and the truths of science are both right and that the only question is how to fit them together. Searle explains how we can reconcile an intuitive view of ourselves as conscious, free, rational agents with a universe that science tells us consists of mindless physical particles. He briskly and lucidly sets out his arguments against the familiar positions in the philosophy of mind, and details the consequences of his ideas for the mind-body problem, artificial intelligence, cognitive science, questions of action and free will, and the philosophy of the social sciences.

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Customer Reviews

Searle is an interesting philosopher for me to read, because I was trained in neurobiology, and Searle is a philosopher who thinks like a neurobiologist. On the other hand, I am a neurobiologist who thinks like a philosopher. Although the book discusses several classical problems such as the problem of freedom and free will, the mind-body problem, right and wrong, etc., for me the two most interesting chapters were the one on the mind-body problem, and the one on cognitive psychology. Here Searle proposes a thorough-going biological and physical explanation that, as a neurobiologist, I've always liked myself. You really need to read these two chapters to understand all the details, of course, but I'll briefly summarize his idea, and you can decide if it makes sense to

you. Basically, Searle says there really is no mind-body problem. This dichotomy occurred because philosophy completely misunderstood the entire issue. There is no mind-body problem, because the mind depends on the brain, and on the neural workings of the brain, and there is no reason even to say that consciousness itself is separate from the brain itself. Searle points out that we explain the properties of normal matter, such as a steel ball, which has mass, weight, is impenetrable, is magnetic, and so on, by reference to its atomic and molecular properties. There is no reason to posit any intervening layer of "rules" or theory. It's the same with the mind-body problem. Mind depends on neurons. All our behavior depends on neurons. There is no reason to posit this intermediate entity of consciousness or of mind which is separate from the underlying biology.

Dealing with some of the problems in philosophy that persist, even in our "post-modern" times, this book by John Searle of the U.C. at Berkeley provides a quick, easily read survey of some of the issues about minds, bodies and artificial intelligence that are of special relevance today. Searle is especially keen to restore a commonsense view of things and so his philosophy seems particularly down-to-earth with regard to some of the knottier problems. His notion that consciousness (the stuff of minds) is to brains as digestion is to the stomach (a function of it) and that there are various orders of explanation that can be invoked for the same phenomenon go a long way toward enabling those who are stuck in the mind-body conundrum to get beyond it. In some ways he offers an updating of Wittgenstein who, similarly, offered a way of getting beyond such "problems" though Wittgenstein reduced it all to a matter of how we talk while Searle wants to say that this only answers the question in part. Unlike Wittgenstein, who dismissed the idea of theoretical explanations superseding ordinary language, Searle wants to reaffirm the importance of such explanations, and to offer a way to develop them. In many ways his proposals make quite a bit of sense. However, I remain struck by his argument against the possibility of what he terms the claims of "strong artificial intelligence" proponents. He describes this view (page 28) as "saying that the mind is to the brain as the program is to the computer hardware" and elaborates by noting that "on this view, any physical system . . . that had the right program with the right inputs and outputs would have a mind in exactly the same sense that you and I have minds.

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