On Hilary Putnam’s Farewell Lecture

With happiness and regret, we print the following exchange between John Searle and Hilary Putnam. Happiness because our pages are graced by a brief yet intense discussion between two of the major thinkers in contemporary philosophy. Regret because this debate was engendered, in part, by the tricky business of transcription. For the record, in Hilary Putnam’s lecture in Volume VIII of The Harvard Review of Philosophy, “the smell of the rose is a rate of neural firings” is not a quotation from John Searle’s work.

A Letter from John Searle

Hilary Putnam’s article “To think with integrity” (The Harvard Review of Philosophy VIII [2000]: 4-13) contains serious misquotations and misrepresentations of my views. Having misquoted me, Putnam attributes to me views that are the opposite of those I stated in the work he cites. Here is the first passage:

Now another little bit of pedagogy. I have been talking a good deal about the unhelpfulness, to put it mildly—the nonsensicality—of sense datum talk, particularly when ‘sense data’ are said to be identical with neural processes. I have been looking at John Searle’s Minds, Brains, and Science, an old book. He says in the first chapter that “the smell of the rose is a rate of neural firings.” There you have the whole ‘Cartesian-cum-materialist’ picture in one sentence: the smell of the rose is a rate of neural firings.... Consider that statement of Searle’s: the smell of the rose is a rate of neural firings (8).

No such sentence occurs in my writings, neither in Minds, Brains, and Science nor in any other of my works. The sentence, “the smell of the rose is a rate of neural firings,” which he quotes and then emphatically repeats, twice, is that rare thing in analytic philosophy, a total fabrication. Well, you might think, perhaps I am just quibbling over details, perhaps Putnam got the overall thrust of my views right even if the exact quote is not correct. Nothing could be further from the truth. Putnam attributes to me a view he describes as “token-identity” of sense data and rates of neuron firings. But that is not a view I have ever held and indeed it is a view I have frequently attacked. It is not surprising that Putnam gives no quotations from my works to support the “token-identity” interpretation. There are none. He would have had to fabricate another “quotation.” The position I do state in the book in question and have maintained in a number of writings is that all of our conscious processes are intrinsic, qualitative, subjective phenomena that are caused by neuronal processes in the brain. On the best available theories, they are caused by

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variable rates of neuron firings relative to different neuronal circuits. The actual passage in which I mention the case of the smell of a rose is the following (by the way, not in the first chapter but in the introduction).

The smell of a rose, the experience of the blue of the sky, the taste of onions, the thought of mathematical formula: all of these are produced by variable rates of neuron-firing, in different circuits, relative to different local conditions in the brain. (John Searle, Minds, Brains, and Science [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984] 9. Emphasis added).

I think a careful philosopher should have noticed the difference between is “identical with” (Putnam’s expression) and is “produced by” (my expression). Having fabricated a quotation, and having misdescribed my views as some crude version of the identity theory, Putnam then goes on to describe my position as “Cartesian-cum-materialist”. The problem with this characterization is that one of the main aims of my writings on the philosophy of mind has been to attack and overcome precisely the traditional categories of both Cartesianism and materialism. I have repeatedly stated that the persistence of these obsolete seventeenth century categories is one of the main sources of confusion in the philosophy of mind.

It gets worse. Later, on the same page, Putnam writes,

[Searle] even says with respect to intentionality that it is a consequence of his view that just as we can define—empirically and not analytically—liquidity or solidity, we may someday be able to define intentionality or the smell of the rose or the white of the chalk in terms of the properties of neuron firings. So his is clearly the view that one psychological attribute will be discovered to be a certain physical attribute. (Putnam 8-9).

This is a another misrepresentation. I have never maintained that intentionality and other things could be “defined” in terms of “properties of neuron firings.” My view is that states such as hunger, thirst, visual perception, and so forth are caused by neuronal processes while at the same time they are realized in the brain system. The point of the analogy with liquidity and solidity is that these formal relations—micro mechanisms producing system features even though the system is constituted by the micro elements—are common in nature and not peculiar to the relations between the mental and the neurobiological. The disanalogy, as I have argued in several of my writings, is that in the case of solidity and liquidity, the causal reduction leads to an ontological reduction. For example, the fact that we can give a complete causal explanation of the surface phenomena of solidity of a material object in terms of molecular behavior leads us to say that solidity is nothing but a certain sort of molecular behavior. Whereas in the case of consciousness and intentionality, the causal reduction does not lead to an ontological reduction. The fact, for example, that we can give a causal explanation of conscious feelings of thirst in terms of neuron firings does not show that thirst is reducible to, is nothing but, neuronal processes. I have frequently attacked the reductionist position which says that it does. In addition to the work he cites, see especially The Rediscovery of the Mind and The Mystery of Consciousness for extensive discussions of all these issues.

Putnam is so locked in the traditional categories—materialism, Cartesianism, token-identity, and so forth—that he is unprepared to acknowledge
that my views do not fit into those categories. It would be difficult to find so many
systematic misquotations, misinterpretations, and mischaracterizations in such a
short piece as Putnam has produced in this article. I am not suggesting that he was
dishonest. I think he was just careless. In philosophy, carefulness is also a form of
integrity.

A Reply by Hilary Putnam

JOHN SEARLE’S LETTER CALLS ATTENTION TO A SERIOUS ERROR THAT I MADE IN
describing his views in my final lecture at Harvard. Searle is a philosopher whose
work I very much respect, even if we have disagreed on various issues over the years,
and I am chagrined that I got his views on the crucial issue of mind-body identity
so wrong. My heartfelt apologies to you, John.

I owe both John Searle and the readers a word as to how the error hap-
pened. This has to do with both the occasion of the lecture and the content. The
lecture was not an “article,” although that is how it appears in its printed form. It
was simply my very last lecture before my retirement from thirty-five years of teach-
ing at Harvard University. It was not written out in advance, and so the quotation
marks that turned, “He says in the first chapter that

‘the smell of the rose is a rate of
neural firings’ ” from a description (admittedly an incorrect one) of Searle’s views
into a direct quotation were introduced when students transcribed the lecture from
a tape. I certainly would not have fabricated such a quotation. When I was
approached with the request to allow the publication of a taped version of the lec-
ture I was very short of time, and all I could do was correct the typescript very
quickly. This does not change the fact that I erred, of course.

As to the content: As Searle explains in his letter, in Minds, Brains, and
Science, he drew an analogy between “states such as hunger, thirst, visual percep-
tion, etc.” and liquidity and solidity. He writes (in the letter) that “the disanaology,
as I have argued in several of my writings, is that in the case of solidity and liquidity,
the causal reduction leads to an ontological reduction.” But the disanalogy was not
pointed out at all in Minds, Brains, and Science. This led me to assume—not unrea-
sonably, I think—that I thought there was a complete analogy and hence that an
“ontological reduction” was also possible in the case of sensations. My error, as I
see it, stemmed not from an unreasonable interpretation of Minds, Brains, and
Science but rather from having failed to read the other writings that Searle refers to.
I will certainly read them now, John, and I will certainly discuss them with greater
care in the future. Again my sincere apologies. ø