

## CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

### CONTENT INDIVIDUATION AND EVOLUTIONARY CONTENT EMERGENCE

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**ABSTRACT:** *This short paper addresses two connected issues which were brought to some focused light by Searle's comments on my contributed article to the anthology Searle's philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement. The first issue concerns the claim that animals cannot have observer-independent intentional content of the same type as that of human beings. The second is my denial that mental content can be merely caused in specific brain states, given its holistic and normative character. I defend my position on the second issue by distinguishing content individuation from content realization while I elaborate my relatively more sophisticated argument for the first claim by clarifying two related senses or levels of 'content' and 'self', respectively associated with certain quasi-rational capacities from a third-person perspective and the subjective holistic consciousness from a first-person perspective with the explicit social-discursive dimension. Searle's Connection Principle is briefly drawn on in this context, with an eye to showing its potential significance when it is extended into the evolutionary settings. In short, it is the full-blown rationality of human holistic discursive practice that ultimately grounds the content talk, which then becomes meaningfully ascribable to certain natural forms of animal existence.*

**Keywords:** *content individuation, content realization, holistic discursive practice, extended Connection Principle*

This is a further constructive engagement in response to Searle's comments on my contribution to the original engagement captioned in the anthology some eight years ago. Related threads of the following thought emerged when I first read Searle's insightful reply to my contributing article, which now, thanks to this special occasion, have the opportunity to become better organized and expressed.

Two issues, which in fact have a deeper connection, were brought to some

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focused light by Searle. The first is my claim that animals cannot have observer-independent intentional content of the same type as that of human beings. The second is my claim that (in Searle's summary) "the holistic and normative character of mental contents make it impossible that they could be caused by and realized in specific brain states." (400) Searle wants to dispute both claims.

Let me take the second issue first. What underlies my original arguments (which, for the sake of brevity of my focused response, cannot be repeated here) for the second claim above is some broadly interpretivist idea that real normativity only, and ultimately, gets established or constituted in some rational community where a certain prevailing holistic discursive practice enables and warrants criteria of correctness. In other words, any individuation of intentional content presumably associated with a body or brain state can only be done within some holistic discursive practice which, in its functioning as well as in its origin, is obviously beyond the individual whose brain state it is. In this light, then, it is not hard to see why Searle's following reply is not quite adequate, or to the central point of my arguments:

... perhaps there is a misunderstanding due to the fact that he thinks of mental *states* as somehow or other small microstates that exit only for an instant. But as far as I am concerned, a state of brain can be as big as the whole brain and can exist over long temporal periods in the life of brain. ... it is obviously incorrect to say that normative holistic structure cannot be embodied in an entire brain extended over time because of course, that is exactly how the normative holistic structure is realized in the biology. (403; my italics)

Here the 'misunderstanding' seems to reside on the other side, i.e., in Searle's mistakenly directed diagnosis of the location of our apparent 'disagreement' in a conceptual map. Let me try to recast the map in a clearer light.

Content individuation, regardless of its ultimately true theory (e.g., interpretivism or other), is a different issue from content realization (both Searle and I accept naturalism in some broad sense) in the space of explanations concerning intentionality. I have no problem with embracing the naturalist or even physicalist idea about the metaphysical grounding of any normative holistic structure in particular brain states of individuals with some kind of attributable mindedness. Thus the 'disagreement,' if there is any, between Searle and me here should not be about any explanatory details in taking the spatial or temporal extensions of relevant brain states. Rather, the real issue should be about how to individuate the intentional content against certain normative backdrop posited or assumed to exist at some level of discourse or rational practice. Without properly settling this issue, it is hardly meaningful to talk about technical details in the physical realization of normative contents or their holistic structures.

I am not sure what account of content individuation Searle in fact has or declines to have. It does not seem to work, or do away with the individuation issue for Searle (or anyone) simply to claim that we know there is content, and whatever it is must be realized physically by individual bodily states. My belief, however, is that normative

content is, foremost or ultimately, a *social* construction based on and constrained by natural evolutionary facts of various kinds. If I am correct, i.e., if this social dimension is fundamental to content generation and identification, then the Searlean diagnosis of my ‘misunderstanding’ above is clearly misplaced. That is, one cannot dissolve or avoid social dimension by a non-social, individual state. Perhaps one needs many such states, and put them under appropriate relationships, in order to yield a transition from individual to social existence. For the very least, the problem here is that Searle didn’t mention at all (probably because he never suspected) the relevance of such explanations aimed at the fundamental social dimension.

A telling example of Searle’s own acknowledging the explanatory tension between some individual mental state and its proper collective subject matter lies in a paper of his on collective intentions (Searle 1990), where he tries to give an analysis of the irreducible content ‘we’ in terms of a semantically ready-made placeholder of the grammatical subject of a sentence about a collective action, even if the referent of such a subject ‘we’ might not in fact exist. Here is no place to discuss the problems (as well as the virtues) of such an account. Suffice it to say that, for Searle, the important and relevant issue of the social origin or grounding of content itself, as opposed to individual *states* supposedly embodying such content, seems to occupy no central place in, or to have no bearing on, his discussion in this context (which, of course, does not mean that he never discusses similar issues in some other contexts).

Now let me turn to the first issue mentioned in the beginning. It concerns the question whether animals can have observer-independent intentional content of the same type as that of human beings. Of course, I never deny that animals have representational (say, perceptual) ‘contents’ of some kind, which can be comparable with human representations of relevant kind (without regarding them equivalent). Here I use scare quote on animal intentional contents because I’d like to highlight the technical and more proper use of normative content in human affairs. When I assert certain things emphatically or bluntly in my original article concerning the difference between human and pre-human animals, I tend to reject the strict application of content to the latter, or to suspend any meaningful application of content to animals until the proper normative status of human discursive content is established. Such wording or shifting manoeuvre, I admit, could be sometimes misleading. Worse still, it could inadvertently shift between the external or third-person perspective and internal or first-person/animal perspective, thus leading to possible conflation of some sort (on the side of readers, or even of myself if not sufficiently careful in talking about representational matters). Take Searle’s example of a dog digging for a bone. We can legitimately describe his factual operating with the category of causation, in scientific or philosophical terms, without conflating it with his subjective understanding of any concepts of causation, bone, or self. But when I say “self-reference presupposes self-consciousness,” its proper interpretation ought to be, thanks to Searle’s helpful clarification, human deliberate actions and conscious perceptions rather than those pre-human ones or human unconscious ones. Two senses/levels of ‘self’ had better be explicitly distinguished in a philosophical context like the present one, i.e., one refers to any individual organism with some active and

reflexive capacity from a third-person perspective whereas the other denotes the subjective holistic consciousness from a first-person perspective.

Having said this, however, I'd like to emphasize that Searle's Connection Principle can be, and perhaps should be, evolutionarily extended. And such extension is to the enhancement, rather than the damage, of Searle's overall theoretical direction or spirit. To avoid any repetition of those argued points in the article (which Searle seems to appreciate largely in the opening remark of his reply), I only want to add one particular comment here. The Connection Principle, once extended in applying to the macro, diachronically more holistic contexts of evolutionary relations among species at different stages or levels of adaptive rationality, or at different degrees of internalizing the Darwinian reasons, can definitely contribute to the plausibility of the following picture I have proposed and endeavored to defend in this article and elsewhere. This is a picture about how the above-mentioned social dimension of content grounding can be evolutionarily explained; or, put in another way, it is about how an epistemological account of content individuation can be combined with a metaphysical account of emergence of natural norms/reasons in some evolutionary order. When such a picture is justified, we can readily resolve the above-mentioned tension between the culture or community-based discursive practice with its holistic structure on the one hand, and the natural or physical realization of those intentional contents within that structure on the other hand.

As part of the implications of this grand picture, it is now easy to see the reason why I should claim that although prehuman animals exist and function well with Darwinian rationales prior to and independently of human existence, it is the full-blown rationality of human normative and interpretive praxis that ultimately grounds the content talk, which is then meaningfully and variously ascribable to the natural forms of animal existence. Terminology or technicality aside, the essential truth remains intact.

Since Searle has no misgivings but positive words about my applying the above picture to some similarity between his approach and the traditional Chinese approach in the article, I have nothing to add or update in this respect.

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