

The Background of Searle's "Background":
Motives, Anticipations, and Problems

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Abstract

In this thesis, I discuss John Searle's account of Intentionality which includes his theory of the Background as something which is necessary, in some sense, to there being such a thing as Intentionality. In chapter one I briefly introduce the notions of both background and normativity. In chapter two, I discuss the motives and initial rationale of Searle's theory. In chapter three I discuss the philosophers he has had contact with who anticipated the Background. In chapter four I claim that Searle has always been conflicted about his theory and I diagnose the root of his conflict, namely that the original rationale required the Background to be normative in nature, but over time it was additionally conceived neurophysiologically, causally, and thus non-normative in nature. I argue that his conflict is inevitable given the irreducibility of the intentional to the non-intentional, and more generally of the normative to the non-normative.

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For Danielle and Hannah

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Chapter 1

Introduction: a short etymology of the word ‘background’

The word ‘background’ has many technical and common meanings. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word is first found in artistic terminology, describing generally the ground or scenery behind a primary object or number of objects. In painting, it is used to describe that part of pictorial representation that appears to be farthest away from the viewer, usually nearest the horizon. It is the space behind, or in the distance, as opposed to the foreground, or the ground in front that is closest to the viewer. The background provides relief for objects in the foreground. In sculpture, it usually denotes the area from which the primary object protrudes, or stands in distinction from. The expression ‘background’ has also enjoyed a history in journalism. A journalist’s source can provide information either *on background* if the information is publicized, but without specific attribution of the source, or *on deep background* if the information is publicized without any attribution of the source.

Common to these technical uses of the word ‘background’ is the connotation of implicitness as opposed to explicitness. With some uses of the term, as in art, the background is largely unobtrusive and thus subordinate to a figure, or a group of figures central to the painting. The background is always that which a central figure is

distinguished from. This is why we say that a particular painting is a portrait of Mona Lisa and not a portrait of Mona Lisa and two uneven horizons and a few trees, etc. The foreground is in focus, while the background is out of focus. With other uses of the term, as in journalism, it gives us a sense of important information, that which is really at the 'heart' of the matter. The background is somehow concealed, and needs to be revealed in order to completely understand crucial points within a particular state of affairs.

However, when we move from artistic jargon, through journalistic jargon, and arrive at the common folk understanding of 'background', that which is subordinate to what 'really matters' depends on the circumstances. The background is either important, or unimportant, depending upon the situation. On the one hand, the word 'background' has the everyday meaning of a person's social history, or previous experiences and training, which are very important aspects for a person trying to find acceptance in a particular field of employment. Socially, the importance of one's background, or history, sometimes tends to ring more important than what one is presently doing. A person's background, including one's lineage, is understood to heavily influence one's future, whether it is acceptance of one's peers, success in one's career, or even the likeliness of returning to a correctional facility.

On the other hand, following another common usage of the term, we commonly understand background music as unobtrusive, relatively unimportant and inconspicuous, yet we commonly find certain background information essential to understanding a particular situation, incident, or problem. It is safe to say that contextual, 'background' objects or 'background' states of affairs, described as such, can be either very important or unimportant to the understanding of certain other objects or states of affairs.

When comparing the technical use of 'background' in the arts, and the multiple common uses of the term, we see its particular use determining to what degree the information or objects it denotes is relevant. Depending on the situation, the use of the word 'background' implies either extreme importance or triviality. It implies that something is either vital to the understanding of a given situation or something superfluous to its understanding. Thus, a dichotomy seems to exist in what is connoted or implied by the use of the word 'background'. It would seem that, in the end, implied relevance/importance might be in the eye of the beholder. However, what transcends the polar differences of implied relevance/importance each use of the word brings is the sense that what is in or of the background is distinct from foreground and what is in the background always has something more explicit, or conspicuous, in front of it. What is in the background is implicit and not explicit. It tends to always be behind other things that tend to, somehow, hide what is there. Perhaps because of this fact alone the 'background' always seems mysterious; always somewhat veiled, concealed, and obscure.

When it comes down to someone's background history, someone's abilities, likes, or experience do factor in whether or not one is well suited for a job. However, not all seemingly relevant background will necessarily factor in (e.g. one's hobby of collecting stamps does not make one more or less suited for the position of a postal worker). It is acceptable to say that immediately relevant background information is important to any given situation. Nevertheless, some would have us believe that all background experience, or information, even stamp collecting is all connected in some way or other. Thus, one cannot count out completely seemingly irrelevant background knowledge or practice. This argument amounts to the thought that everything in the background is

always partly relevant. Taken together, background information, objects, states of affairs, history of practice, etc. all complement the foreground or current situation and, taken together, are each an indelible component of the entire whole.

Now, in philosophy, the word ‘background’ usually denotes something like our common understanding: it denotes contextual information or social history of a person. Similarly, its use connotes implicitness, generality, and the general sense of being not at the forefront, with each particular use bringing with it either a sense of triviality or vitality. However, over the past twenty years John Searle has tried to promote a somewhat new sense of the word ‘background’ within the philosophy of mind. His use of the word, as a term of art, definitely has family resemblances to all uses of the word ‘background’. Many have said that it can be loosely described as closely resembling our common folk understanding of background as meaning ‘context’ or one’s history or training. However, what is new is that Searle’s account ultimately results in a neurophysiological story.

It is the primary purpose of this thesis to investigate and challenge Searle’s theory of the ‘The Background’.¹ The first chapter involves a discussion of Searle’s ‘Background’ theory. Chapter two will discuss the anticipations of the notion of a ‘background’ by discussing other philosophical theories that have a family resemblance to Searle’s thesis. Chapter three will discuss some problems with his theory.

¹ In light of Searle’s new sense of the word, and following his own practice, any reference to his notion of ‘Background’ will be indicated by beginning the term with a capital ‘B’.

1.1 A note on ‘normativity’

‘The Background’, as a thesis, began within Searle’s investigations into speech acts and, subsequently, became more developed in his philosophy of mind. To understand its changes requires an understanding of Searle’s theory of Intentionality, which the next chapter will discuss. Later on in chapter four, the discussion of Searle’s Intentionality (which intimately involves the Background) inevitably involves also the notion of normativity. Normativity is commonly associated with moral issues, and construed as a moral notion. This moral usage of normativity encompasses notions of right or wrong insofar as one does or doesn’t follow a moral rule. The broader notion of normativity concerns the following or not of *any* sort of rule and the consequent correctness or incorrectness, success or failure, of the putative rule-following behaviour. Normativity is thus a fundamentally teleological notion.

Normativity is equivalent to intentionality, broadly construed. Normativity indicates the non-causal, and the non-determinative. Causality, broadly construed, indicates those things in nature and science, or of the world apart from our intentionality. Generally speaking, the normative has an essential connection to a notion of a rule which is different from the natural, causal sequences involved in nature. This is so because rules, which are made by humans, mean something to us. Brute causal sequences, unlike rules, are a matter of natural occurrences uninfluenced by human conceptual interference. Thus, normativity and normative aspects involve conceptual and teleological features that cannot be accounted for by causal explanations. Nevertheless, as we will eventually see, Searle’s theory of the Background (and Intentionality) tries to do just that—he tries to account for normative aspects through causal explanations. I disagree with Searle’s

direction, and I show the problems within his account more fully in chapter four. The second chapter involves a discussion of Searle's Background theory. Chapter three will discuss the anticipations of the notion of 'background' by discussing other philosophical theories that have a family resemblance to Searle's thesis. It is the primary purpose of this thesis to investigate and challenge Searle's theory of 'The Background'.

Chapter 2

Searle's Formulation of the Background

To reiterate, in order to understand 'The Background' and how it has developed requires an understanding of Searle's theory of Intentionality. This chapter discusses Searle's theory of Intentionality and how it inevitably involves 'The Background'. Throughout this chapter, and the others, any reference made to Searle's theory of Intentionality will be indicated by a capital 'I'.

2.1 Intentionality, the Network, and the Background

Searle's theory of the Background is a story that is supposed to explain Intentionality by explaining how we come to have the intentional states that we have. Intentionality, in philosophical parlance, is not the same as intending or intentions, like the intention to mow the lawn. It is a basic characterization of the way in which the mind operates. Somewhat in line with the tradition of Franz Brentano, Searle's 'Intentionality' is a philosophical term that names "that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world."² Psychological states such as perceptions, beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. are considered

² Searle, J. *Intentionality: An essay in the philosophy of mind* (1983). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.1.

examples of Intentional states. Intentional states, for Searle, always involve representation. Simply put, Intentional states ‘represent’ contents, like objects and states of affairs, which determine the ‘conditions of satisfaction’ of an Intentional state.

Searle maintains that Intentional states do not function independently, or in a vacuum. That is, each intentional state determines its conditions of satisfaction “only in relation to” numerous other Intentional states.³ To have one belief means that one must have a myriad of other beliefs in order to have that one belief. Each intentional state ‘refers’ to other intentional states. Thus, an intentional state can only have the conditions of satisfaction that it does, and thus can only be the intentional state that it is, because it is located in a network of other beliefs, desires, etc., each supporting the other. Searle contends further that these beliefs and desires are part of a larger complex of still other psychological states. For example, there will be subsidiary intentions as well as hopes and fears, anxieties and anticipations, feelings of frustration and satisfaction. Searle names this holistic network, “the Network.”⁴

Now, Searle asserts, that if one were to try to follow out the various strands that connect one Intentional state with another, and try to spell out each of the Intentional states within the Network, “we will eventually reach a bedrock of mental capacities that do not themselves consist in Intentional states (representations), but nonetheless form the preconditions for the functioning of Intentional states.”⁵ He calls the collection of these preconditions ‘the Background’. The Background is ‘preintentional’ in the sense that though not a form or forms of Intentionality, it is nonetheless a precondition or a set of

³ Searle, J. *Intentionality* (1983), p.141

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p.143

preconditions of Intentionality.”⁶ In other words, the Background does not function the same way a representational Intentional state does, but it is the necessary precondition for Intentionality.

Chapter five of his book *Intentionality: an Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (1983), is entitled “The Background”, and in section I, under the heading “What exactly is meant by ‘The Background’?”, Searle provides his first, among many, explications of the Background:

The Background is a set of nonrepresentational mental capacities that enable all representing to take place. Intentional states only have the conditions of satisfaction that they do, and thus only are the states that they are, against a Background of abilities that are not themselves Intentional states. (p.143)

At present, one may be puzzled by his reference to ‘nonrepresentational mental capacities’, but to aid in explanation of what these capacities might be, Searle provides a minimal geography of the Background:

A minimal geography of the Background would include at least the following: we need to distinguish what we might call ‘deep Background’, which would include at least all of those Background capacities that are common to all normal human beings in virtue of their biological makeup—capacities such as walking, eating, grasping, perceiving, recognizing, and the preintentional stance that takes account of the solidity of things, and the independent existence of objects and other people—from what we might call the ‘local Background’ or ‘local cultural practices’, which would include such things as opening doors, drinking beer from bottles, and the preintentional stance that we take toward such things as cars, refrigerators, money and cocktail parties. (p.144)

The ‘necessary preconditions for Intentionality’ that make up the Background are, to be sure, a mixed bag. At certain points within his explication of what the elements of the Background are, Searle says that it consists of a certain type of ‘know-how’, including

⁶ Ibid., p.143.

‘knowing how things are’ and ‘knowing how to do things’.(p.144) At other points, Searle refers to the elements of the Background as ‘assumptions’, ‘presuppositions’, ‘stances’ and ‘attitudes’. In other places, they are referred to as ‘abilities’, ‘capacities’, and ‘practices’. Searle, however reluctantly, settles on ‘capacities’ and ‘practices’ as most telling of the elements characteristic of the Background.

As we have seen, Searle’s particular brief for the Background rests on his claim that it is preintentional in the sense that “though not a form or forms of Intentionality, it is nonetheless a precondition or a set of preconditions of Intentionality.”(p.143) This notion of the ‘preintentional’ or ‘non-intentional’ carries with it the corresponding idea that a form of Intentionality must be in the nature of a representation. But, since the elements of the Background do not function as representations, they are not considered to be Intentional either. At any rate, Searle admits he does not know how to demonstrate his hypothesis conclusively. (p.144) Similarly, Searle admits that he knows of “no demonstrative arguments that would prove the existence of the Background”, but he offers the reader “a series of independent investigations” the cumulative effect of which has, he asserts, produced “a belief in the hypothesis of the Background” for him. (pp.144-45)

Of the many phenomena Searle analyzes in terms of a Background, two stand out. These are our understanding of literal meaning and the possession of physical skills. The investigation into our understanding of literal meaning is the inquiry from which the original rationale of the Background arises, and along with the investigation into how we acquire physical skills, offer insights into Searle’s Background.

2.1.1 Searle's first case: Literal meaning

Searle's initial rationale for 'The Background' is found within a paper he wrote in the late 70's called "Literal Meaning" (1978). Although not yet fully blown, a version of Searle's Background theory is invoked to explain how we naturally and unvaryingly understand literal meaning, and do so without precise instruction. Searle challenges the atomistic explanation, which is that the literal meaning of a sentence can be construed as the meaning it has independently of any context whatever. Contrary to this claim, Searle explains that a "set of contextual or background assumptions"⁷ make the understanding of the literal meanings of sentences possible. In opposition to the 'zero' or 'null context' view, a proponent of which he unfortunately does not cite, Searle writes:

[F] or a large number of cases, the notion of literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of background assumptions, and furthermore these background assumptions are not all and could not all be realized in the semantic structure of the sentence in the way that presupposition and indexically dependent elements of the sentence's truth conditions are realized in the semantic structure of the sentence.⁸

In other words, literal meanings cannot be purely atomistic in the sense that they can be understood without any reference to contextual circumstances. The relation of literal meaning only has 'application relative to' a set of background assumptions, and this signals that the relation involves normative, rational, and contentful references. We understand the sentence a certain way, and it makes sense, only with reference to circumstances that are normally the case.

Searle uses the sentence 'the cat is on the mat' as an example of a seemingly context-free utterance that would satisfy any atomist. This sentence first appears to favor

⁷ Searle, J. *Expression and Meaning* (1979), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 117.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

the view that literal meaning is context free, yet Searle thinks that understanding it is possible only against a set of contextual assumptions. For example, when we say or believe that the cat is on the mat we *assume* we are not in space where it might become difficult to decipher whether the cat is on the mat or the mat is on the cat or that the law of gravity is working to keep the cat in place. Likewise, we also assume that mats, although are not normally rigid, act as such when on a rigid floor and that cats don't change into flowers every morning and into soup in the afternoon.⁹

The sentence 'the cat is on the mat' could be made more explicit if one wished by rewriting the sentence including more indexical elements (e.g. This cat right here is now on the mat right here)¹⁰ or by adding descriptions, which would include space-time coordinates. Nevertheless, we understand the sentence without any extra explanation. However, Searle finds that the sentence itself underdetermines its truth conditions with respect to contextual differences which could affect its understanding. Suppose the cat is 'on' the mat, but "they are both floating freely in outer space, perhaps outside the Milky Way Galaxy altogether."¹¹ The sentence does not specify or depict the earth's gravitational field at all. Therefore the question remains, can the cat still be said to be 'on' the mat? Searle replies:

What I think it is correct to say as a first approximation in answering (this) question is that the notion of the literal meaning of the sentence 'The cat is on the mat' does not have a clear application unless we make some further assumptions, in the case of cats and mats floating freely in outer space... (The sentence) only has an application relative to a set of background assumptions¹²

⁹ Fotion, Nick. *John Searle* (2000). Teddington: Acumen Publishing Limited, p. 118.

¹⁰ Searle, J. *Expression and Meaning* Cambridge (1979): Cambridge University Press, p. 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.122. Here, Searle also gives a pictographic example of this point.

This holds despite our attempts to make the sentence clearer. Searle insists that the literal meaning of the sentence is not made clearer simply by making explicit the assumptions behind the literal meaning of the sentence as further truth conditions of the sentence, e.g.:

The cat is on the mat (this sentence only applies at or near the surface of the earth or in some similar gravitational field)¹³

A literal application of the sentence ‘The cat is on the mat’ does not need a gravitational field to be literally true, and, more importantly, if all assumptions about gravitational fields were, somehow, represented as part of the semantic content of the sentence, one would still be left with an indefinite number of other contextual assumptions that would have to be dealt with.¹⁴ In other words, as Searle’s argument goes, the list of contextual assumptions would be endless, because each sentence that was used to clarify would need further clarification. Such a regress does not bode well for the idea of a literal meaning that is said to stand on its own.

To support this claim, Searle explains the many ways the word ‘on’ can be construed and draws some specific conclusions about literal meaning. For sentences like ‘The cat is on the mat’:

- 1) The notion of the literal meaning of the sentence only has application relative to a set of background assumptions.
- 2) The truth conditions of the sentence will vary with variations in the background assumptions.

¹³ Ibid., p.123.

¹⁴ Ibid.

- 3) Given the absence or presence of some background assumptions the sentence does have determinate truth conditions.
- 4) Therefore, Searle concludes, the notion of literal meaning cannot exist outside of a context and, at the same time, be said to have determinate truth conditions.

Searle concludes that there is no “constant set of assumptions that determine the applicability of the notion of literal meaning.”¹⁵ Also, he adds, following the thread of his example(s), that these assumptions are not specifiable as part of the semantic content of the sentence, or as presuppositions of the applicability of the semantic content of the sentence, for at least two reasons:

- 1) They (the assumptions and/or presuppositions) are not fixed and definite in number and content
- 2) Each specification of an assumption tends to bring in other assumptions, because the specification (being a sentence itself) would require a determination of the applicability of its own literal meaning, and so on.

These two reasons combine to give the beginnings of Searle’s (infinite) regress argument. Any sentence, B, used to specify sentence A would, like A, require specification by way of a sentence. Each sentence, being underdetermined in terms of its literal meaning, could only be clarified by being paired with a specification, or a number of specifications, each begging its own explanation.

With his account of the under-determination of literal meaning in hand, Searle generalizes his conclusions to apply to sentences that are used as commands or wishes. These too, he says, cannot be fulfilled or met without a relation to a set of background assumptions. Truth conditions, obedience conditions, and fulfillment conditions are all

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 125

conditions of satisfaction and are, according to Searle, literally undetermined without a context¹⁶ and may, in fact, be impossible to specify.

In his paper, Searle establishes that our understanding of literal meaning does not occur in a contextual vacuum, but is dependent upon contextual information. Searle also makes a case explaining the under-determination of literal sentence meaning within the actual sentence. However, Searle does not leave it at that. He soon takes his notions about ‘background assumptions’ and broadens them to become apart of a general description of how the mind works. This description involves his theory of Intentionality.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 127

2.1.2 A set of ‘background assumptions’ turns into ‘The Background’

Searle’s next major work, *Intentionality* (1983), dedicates considerable portions to discussing the significance of ‘a set of background assumptions’ with regard to intentional states, perception, and action. The result is a notion more substantial than a mere set of background assumptions. It is a more basic psychological ‘context’. This ‘context’ is given a special name: ‘The Background’, and the focus shifts from language to representation.¹⁷ He asserts that literal meaning and intentionality are both forms of representation (the first being linguistic representation, and the second being intentional representation), that background assumptions are required for the understanding of both of these types of representation¹⁸, and that *representation* itself functions against a set of background assumptions. Accordingly, the regress argument that applied to the background assumptions of literal meaning is now extended to also apply to the background assumptions of Intentional states.

Searle explains that our perceptions themselves, like our understanding of a language, are dependent upon pre-conditional, contextual ‘knowledge’ that determines how we perceive things to be. Take our previous example: ‘The cat is on the mat’. Searle asks us to consider the “contextual dependency of the applicability of the contents of our

¹⁷ For Searle, Intentional states (representations) are always ‘about’ something. They consist of an ‘Intentional content’ in a ‘psychological mode’. For example, an Intentional state may be a belief (psychological mode) that it is raining (Intentional content). The content is described as a whole proposition with ‘direction-of-fit’. Direction of fit can be understood as simply as direction of conformity, where a belief about the world has a mind-to-world direction of fit, a directive statement, like ‘go cut the grass’ has a world-to-mind direction of fit. The circumstances under which an Intentional state (representation) may be satisfied are what Searle calls ‘conditions of satisfaction’. Searle gives a seemingly tautologous explanation of these conditions. See *Intentionality* (1983), pp.12-13 where Searle says: “Conditions of satisfaction are those conditions which, as determined by the Intentional content, must obtain if the state is to be satisfied.”

¹⁸As he already asserted in *Expression and Meaning* (1979) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 131.

perceptions.”¹⁹ With regard to our example, he asks us to consider the ‘qualitative visual aspects’ that would accompany our now qualitative perceptual specification: ‘I see that the cat is on the mat’, Searle says:

In my present experience I assume that I am perceiving the cat and the mat from a certain point of view where my body is located; I assume that these visual experiences are causally dependent on the state of affairs that I perceive; I assume that I am not standing on my head and seeing cat and mat upside down, etc; and all these assumptions are in addition to such general assumptions as that I am in a gravitational field, there are no wires attaching to cat and mat, etc. Now, the intentionality of the visual experience will determine a set of conditions of satisfaction only against a set of background assumptions which are not themselves part of the visual experience²⁰

As Searle asserts, the background assumptions include the idea that the law of gravity holds, my equilibrium is not off, and the cat is not some sort of marionette. However, we do not think of these ‘assumptions’ when we perceive the cat on the mat, nevertheless some peculiar stable ‘understanding’ that the context holds a certain sense of typical and natural stability affects the content of our Intentional states without actually becoming explicit within that Intentional state.

I don’t for example see the point of view from which I see the cat is on the mat and I don’t see the gravitational field within which they are both located. Yet the conditions of satisfaction which are determined by the content of my perception are in part dependent on such assumptions.²¹

Contents of perception (i.e. ‘assumptions’), are different from, but are responsible for, the contents of an observation. Like our *literal understanding* of the sentence ‘the cat is on the mat’ our *perception* of that circumstance is possible only because of certain

¹⁹ Ibid., p.135. Searle views perception as being the primary form of intentionality that all other forms of intentionality depend on.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 135-136.

²¹ Ibid., p.136.

background assumptions. There is no separate act of interpretation whatsoever in addition to seeing the written sentence or hearing the utterance and having the thought of the situation expressed by the sentence or the utterance. Thus, for Searle, representation and intentional states are what is at issue and he concludes that literal meaning, perception, and intentional states are made possible through a set of these background assumptions.

2.1.3 The Acquisition and Execution of Physical Skills

With the evidence of the literal meaning in hand, Searle gives another example that, he feels, is evidence that supports his theory of ‘The Background’. Searle gives us an example that illustrates the movement or development from the novice to the expert when acquiring some physical skill or capacity. This movement, Searle claims, is from representational and intentional actions to non-representational and non-intentional capacities. He uses the example of skiing to make his point, but his example can be applied to all acquired skills or capacities. Reminiscent of Gilbert Ryle’s²² examples, the example goes as follows: a beginning skier is often given verbal instructions so that he may eventually overcome his ‘beginner’ tendencies within his new environment. These instructions include: ‘lean forward’, ‘bend the ankles’, ‘keep the weight on the downhill ski’, etc. A novice, who has the desire to become a better skier, will likely follow through the instructions as explicit representations.²³ As Searle notes, “Skiing is one of those skills which is learned with the aid of explicit representations. But after a while the skier gets better; he no longer needs to remind himself of the instructions, he just goes out and

²² See discussion of Gilbert Ryle in chapter three below.

²³ Searle, J., *Intentionality* (1983), p. 150.

skies.”²⁴ When the beginner gets better, he does not ‘internalize’ a set of rules. The explicit rules or instructions, that were once explicit, conspicuous, and representational (and thus intentional), “become progressively irrelevant.”²⁵ This means that The Background, with reference to physical skills, does not consist of a large set of unconscious and representational rules. When the beginner skier gets ‘better’, the repeated experience of following the rules given by the instructor do not fix within his mind ‘unconscious Intentional contents.’ They simply become part of The Background.

With the repetitious execution of rule-following actions comes the habituation of these actions in the sequence they have been exercised, but the practice does not, as Searle notes, result in a perfect memorization of the rules. Repeated practice, he perhaps somewhat carelessly²⁶ concludes, “enables the body to take over and the rules to recede into the Background”²⁷ The conscious following of rules becomes something else entirely. If the Background does not consist of rules as commonly construed, what then does it consist of? The answer he gives is ‘capacities and stances that are themselves nonrepresentational’. Searle believes that the notion of a Background which does not consist of ‘unconscious Intentional contents’ but of nonrepresentational capacities, stances, etc. allows for a more realistic view rather than what he calls the traditional cognitivist view. This way, he says: “[w]e are able to account for the data with a more economical explanatory apparatus if we do not have to suppose that each physical skill is

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Searle’s saying that the rules ‘recede’ into the Background makes it sound like the Background’s elements include rules, and this contradicts the point Searle is trying to make, which is that the Background consists of something other than rules.

²⁷ Ibid.

underlain by a large number of unconscious mental representations.”²⁸ In other words, our present understanding of the execution of a physical skill with respect to a Background that is non-representational avoids the counter-intuitive, absurd, notion that explicit representations might account for it, and so is a more plausible explanation. However, that does not mean that his Background theory is therefore correct. Searle buttresses it in explaining the automaticity of the execution of tasks by the expert. Recall his example of the skier, now an expert:

His body makes thousands of very rapid adjustments to variations of terrain. Now, which is more plausible: when his body makes these adjustments, it is only because he is making a very rapid series of unconscious calculations applying unconscious rules, or is it rather that the racer’s body is so trained that these variations in the terrain are dealt with automatically?²⁹

It would seem that the account of skiing as an internalization of a large set of rules would *not* lend itself to the automaticity of the expert skier’s reaction to terrain. Intuitively speaking, the automaticity with which a racing skier must react to terrain in order to simply be able to ‘ski’ a course would seemingly be significantly handicapped by such an internalization of rules. What happens to the explicit rules or instructions we are given as beginners when we have progressed to the point where we can perform that activity well beyond the simple instructions that got us there? Searle wants to say that these instructions or rules, over time, transform or ‘recede’ into the Background.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁹ Ibid.

2.2 What Searle means by ‘mental’

At first glance, it is not altogether clear what Searle means when he speaks about what is ‘mental’. However, it clearly is important for him to associate the adjective ‘mental’ with the Background. In *Intentionality*, he tries to give a meaningful account of the term ‘mental’. It seems that the Background, characterized as mental, is to be distinguished from the notion as understood by other philosophers. Despite this attempt, one is left with a more negative account of what ‘mental’ means, rather than a positive one—negative in that we come to understand what it might be by Searle’s saying what it isn’t.

Searle, in an attempt to distinguish his ‘mental’ conception of the Background, attempts to say what ‘mental’ is not. An example is the following paragraph where he at best only indirectly characterizes how the Background is mental with reference to non-mental aspects of the Background:

One could argue, and I have seen it argued, that what I have been calling the Background is really social, a product of social interaction, or that it is primarily biological, or even that it consists of actual objects in the world such as chairs and tables, hammers and nails—‘the referential totality of ready-to-hand equipment’, in a Heideggerian vein. I want to say there is at least an element of truth in all these conceptions but that does not detract from the crucial sense in which the Background consists of mental phenomena.³⁰

Thus, ‘mental’ is supposed to describe the Background as something other than what is merely social, biological, or objects in the world, etc. Searle urges that the Background, as mental, is not merely the combination of all of these things or relations, but does

³⁰ Searle, J. *Intentionality* (1983), pp. 153-154.

concede that the Background cannot be fully understood as just mental. Thus, Searle wants to hold on to the idea that the Background is somehow made up of these relations:

[T]he Background is indeed derived from the entire congeries of relations which each biological-social being has to the world around itself. Without my biological constitution, and without the set of social relations in which I am embedded, I could not have the Background that I have. But all these relations, biological, social, physical, all of this embeddedness, is only relevant to the production of the Background because of the effects it has on me, specifically the effects it has on my mind-brain.³¹

Searle does not explain further what the ‘mind-brain’ is, but instead opts to downgrade the relevance of us actually having certain biological, social, and physical relations to the world. He attempts to elucidate the point that the ‘world is relevant to my Background only because of my interaction with the world’ by using the ‘brain-in-the-vat’ fable to illustrate the fact that, even were we all in a world of hallucinations, we would have the intentional states that we have and we would have the Background we have. These claims fall short of explaining exactly what he means by a ‘mental’ Background. In the next paragraph, Searle writes:

That I have a certain set of Intentional states and *that* I have a Background do not logically require that I be in fact in certain relations to the world around me, even though I could not, as a matter of empirical fact, have the Background that I do have without a specific biological history and a specific set of social relations to other people and physical relations to natural objects and artifacts.³²

Here, Searle understands that both the Background, and Intentional states, do not logically require certain relations to the world; however, in order for one to actually have them, they both empirically require a specific biological history and a specific set of

³¹ Ibid., p. 154

³² Ibid.

social and physical relations. This means that, although he does not believe that he is a brain in a vat, it is logically possible that we are brains in vats, and thus it can't be proven logically false. Largely a Cartesian intuition, this position denies a logical connection between the outside world, and the mind and its content, making Searle an internalist. As such, Searle takes the methodologically internalist position declaring content as independent from the external world, and opens the path he takes explaining that the background, and all the habits, practices, presuppositions, etc. are really just 'realized in human brains'. This position makes seemingly content-laden, propositional content merely a structure within the brain. However, it seems far fetched that content-laden intentional states can be logically accounted for by a structure in the brain; C-fibers firing simply do not have any content, at least not in a way that would mean anything to our intentional life. Facts about the Background cannot be accounted for by facts about the brain. Nevertheless, for Searle, his conclusion is commonsensical:

The Background, therefore is not a set of things nor a set of mysterious relations between ourselves and things, rather it is simply a set of skills, stances, preintentional assumptions and presuppositions, practices, and habits. And all of these, as far as we know, are realized in human brains and bodies. There is nothing whatever that is 'transcendental' or 'metaphysical' about the Background, as I am using the term.³³

It seems that, since Searle's belief that the Background is empirically dependent on worldly things, while logically independent from them, the nature of the Background is left wide open and thus obscure. The Background becomes unintelligible by the sheer magnitude of the list of things that it could comprise. Now, the Background can arbitrarily be made to mean anything, including a brain structure. Searle exploits this.

³³ Ibid.

Indeed, the ‘Background’, described as a set of ‘mental’ capacities, certainly implicates the biological or social capacities that Searle feels he has shown them otherwise to be. Certainly, skill sets and habits are often made understandable through biological description. Likewise, practices and relations between us and others are understandable to us when characterized using social descriptions. Similarly, social or biological descriptions, when describing acts that may fall within the wide definition of the Background, are intelligible to us. Despite Searle’s acceptance of the biological and physical underpinnings of our practices, stances, habits, etc., he still thinks there is something more to the mind than that, and he calls it ‘mental’. However, what ever else there is, as a negative thesis, is not easily understood without being just as mysterious as the ‘metaphysical’ or ‘transcendental’ descriptions it is designed to replace. Searle’s going neurophysiological, if anything, increases the mystery.

The acceptability of Searle’s explanation of his meaning of ‘mental’ is questionable when considering what its explanation is meant to oppose (e.g. mysterious explanations about the mind, like the Cartesian soul). Contrary to his aspirations, Searle’s explanation of the mental is arguably just as mysterious, and is cold comfort when faced with the ‘transcendental’ or ‘metaphysical’ alternative because ‘realization’ is mysterious and certainly is not transparent. Searle succeeds only in describing the ‘mental’ as different from biological-social relations, but only in negative terms. There is neither a positive account of the ‘mental’, nor an intelligible account of the ‘mental’. Thus, Searle’s negative explanation does little to avoid this problem and it will be considered again in the next two chapters, when we discuss Background capacities described as ‘preintentional’ or ‘nonintentional’, which are defined in a similar way.

2.2.1 The story of ‘the Background’ is a neurophysiological story

Searle’s explanation of the Background reveals his neurophysiologicalism; namely, his belief that the story of our thoughts and our minds, while remaining a ‘mental’ story is really just a physical story. The Background, and its elements, are construed as a part of our neurophysiological makeup. In the end, this approach puts into question whether or not humans can truly be said to have direct knowledge of the world, for if there is some connection to the real world that would allow this type of knowledge, it is a mechanistic, ‘external’ causal connection, as opposed to an intentional ‘internal’ connection.

The Background, construed as causal, can only be involved in intentionality in a brute way, and can only be involved in causal chains of events. This means that the Background can’t function normatively, but, somehow, influences our intentional, normative, lives. The true nature of Searle’s Background is revealed as simply the way our bodies work. Searle states:

Each of us is a biological and social being in a world of other biological and social beings, surrounded by artifacts and natural objects. Now, what I have been calling the Background is indeed derived from the entire congeries of relations which each biological-social being has to the world around itself. Without my biological constitution, and without the set of social relations in which I am embedded, I could not have the Background that I have. But all of these relations, biological, social, physical, all this embeddedness, is only relevant to the production of the Background because of the effects that it has on me, specifically the effects that it has on my mind-brain. The world is relevant to my Background only because of my interaction with the world; and we can appeal to the usual ‘brain in a vat’ fable to illustrate this point. Even if I am a brain in a vat—that is, even if all my perceptions and actions in the world are hallucinations, and the conditions of satisfaction of all of my externally referring Intentional states are, in fact, unsatisfied—nonetheless, I do have the Intentional content that I have, and thus necessarily have exactly the same Background that I would have if I were not a brain in a vat and had that

particular Intentional content. *That* I have a certain set of Intentional states and *that* I have a Background do not logically require that I be in fact in certain relations to the world around me, even though I could not, as a matter of empirical fact, have the Background that I do have without a specific set of social relations to other people and physical relations to natural objects and artifacts.³⁴

First, this passage surely does not do much to narrow down what ‘The Background’ is.

As Searle would have us understand it, the Background can be made up of almost anything in the world. Any object, state of affairs, social situation, etc. can be an element of the ‘Background’, but the question of whether or not these things and situations truly exist does not seem to come into play when determining what are the particular elements of someone’s particular Background. The fact is that the brain, as a complex of neurophysiological causal structures, is not a contentful thing, but the Background is

It seems that Searle wants his Background theory to fill two distinct explanatory roles, both explaining how our intentional states are possible. The one role is to explain the function of the Background causally, and the other is to explain it normatively. This is apparent with his reference to the ‘mind-brain’. The mind is usually understood as a contentful thing, whereas the brain is usually construed as causal—these are two separate opposed things. Whether the mind can be identified with the brain, causal explanatory roles cannot be identified with normative explanatory roles.

It is difficult to comprehend Searle’s conception of the Background because of its apparent schizophrenic nature. In one respect, the Background is characterized as content laden, playing a normative role in our intentional lives. In another respect, the

³⁴ Searle, J. *Intentionality* (1983), p.154

Background is characterized as neurophysiological, playing a causal and mechanistic role. These two characterizations have cross-purposes and pose a conflict in his account. My philosophical proclivities are such that one characterization proves to be from the ‘good’ Searle in this Jekyll and Hyde type of relationship, the other from the ‘bad’ Searle. The next chapter examines anticipations of the Background. It outlines a history of the notion of Background that affirms its normative and content laden role—the good Searle—rather than a role that is causal, neurophysiological, or mechanistic, i.e., the bad Searle.

Chapter 3

Anticipations of the Background

Introduction

Searle does not usually draw connections between his work and that of others or indicate precedents and possible sources of inspiration. His theory of the Background is a relevant illustrative example of this. In this chapter, the discussion turns from the development of Searle's thought alone to the development of Searle's thought as compared to that of other contemporary and earlier philosophers³⁵. It is not the purpose of this chapter to write the missing bibliography of Searle's work. The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the general hypothesis of a background by showing parallels in thought between Searle and other philosophers. It is hoped that this chapter will add credibility to a hypothesis of a background in general and promote the acceptance of the idea that such important philosophers must be on to something. Searle's idea of a background is not entirely unprecedented.

³⁵ There is some evidence that Heidegger is another anticipator of a background-like theory. Searle admits that there is at least some truth to the comparison. See *Intentionality* (1983), p.154. One might think, however, that Searle wouldn't have acknowledged Heidegger at all except in response to his colleague Hubert Dreyfus who draws many similarities between Searle and Heidegger in his book *Being-in-the-World* (1990). My aim is to look into the Oxonian philosophers who would have been in contact with Searle while he was in Oxford, as well as at the Great Anticipator (Wittgenstein).

To begin, I will discuss the work of two of Searle's teachers: namely, H.P. Grice and P.F. Strawson. Next, I will turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein to show congruencies of thought between him and Searle regarding the idea of a background. Finally, I will discuss the work of Searle's teacher Gilbert Ryle. It is my contention that they have everything the good Searle has (regarding a theory roughly like his Background), without going neurophysiological. Much or most of his concept of the Background has historical antecedents or precedents. What is new is, for a lack of a better term, the neurophysiologicalizing of it.

3.1 The work of H. P. Grice

One philosopher whose work closely resembles Searle's is his former teacher turned colleague, H.P. Grice. One could argue that his opposition to some of Grice's ideas is, at least partially, responsible for the direction Searle's thought took leading to the formulation of the idea of the Background. Searle and Grice shared a mutual desire to clear up problems with language and communication through the explanation of speech acts. It is within their discussions of speech acts that we find their thoughts converge.

Generally, Searle and Grice were interested in how we come to know or understand things through speech and communication. In his paper entitled "Logic and Conversation" (1975), Grice attempts to formalize 'maxims' that normally govern conversation as such, 'irrespective of its subject matter', in order to describe the ideal conditions under which conversation is able to take place.³⁶This is where Grice

³⁶ See pp. 41-43 in "Logic and Conversation". In this paper, Grice attempts to settle differences between those he calls 'formalists', 'informalists', and those who feel that there are divergences in meaning between

formulates his idea of ‘conversational implicature’. It is such ‘conversational implicature’ that bears some resemblance to Searle’s early formulation of his theory of the Background. In particular, Searle’s initial conception of the Background within the area of speech acts and literal meaning can be traced to Grice’s work. In the paper “Indirect Speech Acts” (1975), Searle actually acknowledges Grice’s notion of Conversational Maxims and the Cooperative Principle as a step in the right direction, however inadequate, and puts forth an argument for the inclusion of what he considers vital to communication in conversation, viz. the Background³⁷. The reason why Grice was determined to map out that which is needed in order for communication to take place is that some utterances used in conversation have implied meanings that are not part of the conventional meanings of those utterances. These implied meanings are referred to as ‘conversational implicatures’.

Conversational implicature, according to Grice, is that which is implied by an utterance, but is nevertheless distinct from what is actually said. What is ‘said’, as Grice puts it, can only best be described as closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) one has uttered.³⁸ Here is an example Grice gives to show the difference between implicature and conventional meaning:

Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies,

formal devices such as \sim , \wedge , (x), etc., and their natural language analogs or counterparts. On the one hand, the first group thinks that formal devices are more ‘scientific’ and possess a decisive advantage over their natural counterparts because of their ability to be simplified, put into formulas, and used to handle dubious forms of inference. Insofar there is a difference in meaning between the formal device and its natural counterpart, it is because of an imperfection of natural language. On the other hand, the second group thinks that language need not bear the burden of scientific rigor in order to be adequate and intelligible.

³⁷ See Searle’s “Indirect Speech Acts” (1975) n.41 and p.61. Also, see pg. 11 above.

³⁸ Grice, H.P. “Logic and Conversation” (1975), p. 44.

*Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.*³⁹

Apart from a context that would make the meaning behind such a reply discernible, A may ask what B was implying, suggesting, or what was meant by his response (assuming it is not meant literally). Presumably B was implying that C is one to succumb to the temptations of his job, or that his colleagues are deceitful and untrustworthy, etc. This example, Grice suggests, shows a distinction between the conventional meaning of what is said and what is implied or implicated in what is said. Grice gives further explanation of what can be 'meant' by what is 'said' apart from a specific context:

...Given a knowledge of the English language, but no knowledge of the circumstances of the utterance one would know something about what the speaker had said, on the assumption that he was speaking standard English, and speaking literally⁴⁰

Clearly, the description of what is 'said', different from what is 'implied, suggested, meant', simply involves a literal understanding of the utterance that can be understood without any particular description of the context of the utterance. But, Grice admits, for a full identification of what a speaker actually means (intends) one would obviously need to know such particulars as who the utterance was about, the time the utterance was executed, and the meaning a particular utterance would have at a particular time.

Grice creates an apparatus of 'maxims' governing implicatures unaccounted for by context of time of utterance.⁴¹ Such maxims are designed to govern implicatures that are fundamentally connected with certain general features of discourse. According to

³⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 45.

Grice, verbal exchanges normally are, to varying degrees, cooperative efforts. Those who participate in such an exchange recognize what could be said to be a common purpose or a set of purposes with a common direction. Grice calls this feature of verbal exchanges the 'Cooperative Principle' and prescribes four categories or specific maxims that yield results in accordance with it. Grice calls these categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. The maxim of 'Quantity' stipulates that one's contribution in a verbal exchange be no more and no less informative than required. The maxim of 'Quality' says do not say what you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 'Relation' simply states, 'be relevant'. 'Manner' involves how what is said is to be said. Simply put: be perspicuous. This means one must avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, or that which is unnecessary, and one must be brief and orderly. The cooperative principle and maxims are there to produce an ideal conversational environment where implicatures can be discerned.

Conversational implicature must possess certain features. If one is to assume the presence of conversational implicature one has to assume that, at least, the cooperative principle is being observed. If one 'opts out' of the observation of the cooperative principle, it follows that a generalized conversational implicature can be cancelled in a particular case. It may be explicitly cancelled by the addition of a clause that implies or declares that the speaker has opted out or contextually cancelled if the form of utterance that usually carries it is used in a context that makes it clear that the speaker is opting out. According to Grice, conversational implicature presupposes an initial knowledge of the conventional force or meaning (also understood as 'literal meaning') of the expression that is distinct from, or not part of, the meaning of the conversational implicature. In

other words, with the presence of a conversational implicature, one utterance carries with it two distinct meanings: conventional commitment and conversational implicature.

Grice's Maxims of conversation and the cooperative principle are designed to characterize an ideal situation where a productive conversation can take place; one where both participants work together in order to come to some mutual understanding (including the situation where both sides of the argument agree to disagree). Grice's maxims are designed to illuminate most conversational implicatures that may arise. However, as Grice admits, figuring them out is no easy task. He writes:

... [T]o calculate a conversational implicature is to calculate what has to be supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Cooperative Principle is being observed and since there may be various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open, the conversational implicature in such cases will be [a] disjunction of such specific explanations; and if the list of these is open, the implicature will have just the kind of indeterminacy that many actual implicatures do in fact seem to possess.⁴²

Thus, the problems that hinder the task of calculating a conversational implicature for Grice parallel those that impede the task Searle introduces as a means to pinning down conventional (or literal) meaning of words and sentences. It seems that to engage in deciphering implicatures may be a potentially boundless and indefinite exercise because of a potentially infinite regress of explanation. Where Grice leaves this conclusion open, Searle introduces the idea of 'the Background' to account for this shortcoming.

In his paper "Indirect Speech Acts" Searle, all but directly citing Grice, uses Grice's principles of conversation to construct an apparatus to explain the indirect part of

⁴² Grice, P. "Logic and Conversation" (1975), p. 58.

indirect speech acts: “[It] includes a theory of speech acts, certain general principles of cooperative conversation, and mutually shared background information of the speaker and the hearer, together with an ability on the part of the hearer to make inferences.”⁴³

Here, the mutually shared background information includes both linguistic and nonlinguistic information, which, as we have seen through our discussion of the Background, could include an indefinite variety of capacities, preconditions, etc.

As Searle asserts, the problem with using only the principles of cooperative conversation (closely tied to a theory of speech acts) is that it is inadequate for ever-changing forms of speech within language. Although the principles of conversational cooperation do provide a framework within which indirect illocutionary acts can be meant and understood, certain forms of speech, while keeping their literal meanings, will tend to become conventionally established as the standard idiomatic forms for indirect speech acts.⁴⁴ Through the use of both the principles of cooperative conversation (with a theory of speech acts) and background information, one can find that, first, there is an indirect speech act and, second, how it’s primary illocutionary point differs from its secondary or ulterior illocutionary point.

Searle’s recognition of inadequacy in Grice’s theory regarding conversational implicature and the rules of conversation for the determination of the implicata of statements in conversation leads Searle to invoke the Background. In other words, Searle thinks that the inevitable under-determination faced by Grice’s attempts at determining

⁴³ Searle, J. “Indirect Speech Acts” (1975), p. 61.

⁴⁴ Ibid., See pp. 64-77. Our tendency to be polite to one another gives us an example of this phenomenon. Searle says the most prominent motivation for indirectness in requests is politeness, and that certain forms naturally tend to become the conventionally polite ways of making indirect requests. For example ‘Can you pass the Salt?’ is a request to pass the salt and not a question about one’s abilities.

conversational implicatures needs further explanation. It concerns Searle enough to appeal to the idea of the Background, and how it works.

3.2 The work of P. F. Strawson

Searle's thought has similarities to that of his teacher, P. F. Strawson. Although he falls short of directly citing him, Searle's understanding of the difference between meaning and use can be shown to be influenced by Strawson. What is apparent is that Searle's understanding and use of 'presupposition' seems to be entirely Strawsonian.⁴⁵ Since Searle often includes presuppositions within his explanations of what is included in the Background, it seems appropriate to give some description of Strawson's ideas and where they sit in Searle's thesis of the Background.

P. F. Strawson first invoked the term 'presupposition' through a disagreement with Bertrand Russell. In "On Denoting" (1905), Russell said that the sentence 'The present King of France is bald' is false because there is no present King of France. For Strawson, to say that 'The present King of France is bald' is false, is moot because there is no King of France. In order for the sentence to be true or false there must be a referent (A King of France), otherwise the question cannot be asked whether it is true or false. Thus, Strawson invoked the notion of presupposition. According to Strawson, what is 'presupposed' is what is implicitly involved in making an assertion. The *use* of a sentence (a used sentence being a statement) assumes a 'presupposition' (or number of

⁴⁵ Although Searle does not credit the use of Strawson's presupposition in *Intentionality* (1983) or any other work regarding the "Background", he does acknowledge a use of it in *Speech Acts*. (p. 126) Searle also is said to have defended it against Russell's notion of the truth-value status of sentences. See Grice's *Studies in the Way of Words*, p. 270.

presuppositions). A presupposition is a necessary condition for either the truth or the falsity of the statement that presupposes it. Take, for example, the following sentence: 'My daughter is a smart child.' When spoken aloud, at some time and place, it is a statement and an assertion. Regardless of whether or not the young girl exhibits intelligent behavior, the assertion presupposes that I do, in fact, have at least one female child. Therefore, it follows that the existence of my daughter is a *necessary precondition* for determining the truth or falsity of the statement: 'My daughter is a smart child'. Strawson stresses, however, that the sentence still has meaning without the precondition. The statement does not operate within the trichotomy 'either true or false or meaningless': an understanding of the notion of a statement that, Strawson concludes, contains a confusion of sentence and statement. For Strawson, as with Searle, the difference between meaning and use is explicit. The sentence 'my daughter is a smart child' is not a meaningless sentence even if the statement proven false by the fact that I did not have at least one female child at the time the statement was uttered (used).

Alone, without it being used in some context, the sentence 'my daughter is a smart child' is a perfectly significant sentence and is not meaningless. However, as Strawson notes, "it is senseless to ask, of the *sentence*, whether it is true or false".⁴⁶ It is about *statements* only that the question about truth or falsity can arise. Strawson adds that, with the use of a sentence such as 'my daughter is a smart child', one *commits himself* to the existence of at least one female child that is his own. Strawson explains:

⁴⁶ Strawson, P. F. *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1960), p. 175.

For if a statement S presupposes a statement S' in the sense that the truth of S' is a precondition of the truth-or-falsity of S, then of course there will be a kind of logical absurdity in conjoining S with the denial of S'.⁴⁷

This describes precisely the relation, with regard to our previous example, between the statement that 'my daughter is a smart child' (S) and the statement that I have at least one female child that is mine (S'). The statement S cannot be true unless S' is, but S cannot be false unless S' is true. It is in that sense that S' is a presupposition. According to Strawson, any question of the truth or falsity of S without regard to S' results in logical absurdity.

Strawson distinguishes between two types of logical absurdity here, where one is straightforward contradiction and the other is more specific to the case in question. First, it is self-contradictory to conjoin S with the denial of S' if S' is a necessary condition of the truth of S. Second, it is more pertinent to point out a different kind of logical absurdity at work here. The absurdity occurs with the conjunction of S with the denial of S' when S' is a necessary condition of the truth or falsity of S. In other words, in the second case the question of whether S is true or false is not a matter of self-contradiction, but is moot without the presupposition of S'. Where the relation in our first case is that S entails S', in the second case there exists a different relation, as Strawson says, called presupposition: S presupposes S'.

The theory of presupposition and the theory of the Background meet on a very special level regarding meaning. Where the literal meaning of a sentence does not preserve a rigid meaning that is not context dependent, the presupposition of a statement

⁴⁷ Ibid.

does not determine any truth conditions without reference to contextual information.

When a statement is made, a certain presupposition (or a set of presuppositions) is *committed* to by the fact the statement was made. According to Strawson, it would be illogical not to be so committed. Likewise, in the case of Searle's example of literal meaning, our understanding of the statement commits us to our Background (including a commitment to objects, states of affairs, realism, other minds, etc.) because, without it, our understanding would not be possible. In this understanding of the Background, the act of denying the Background would be self-defeating.

Searle's Background seems to be heavily influenced by Strawson's ideas regarding presupposition. Searle's approach to arguing for the Background does parallel Strawson's proof of presupposition and Searle certainly utilizes this notion of Strawson's presupposition when formulating his notion of the Background. Searle eventually characterizes the statement made/presupposition relation as analogous to the relation of beliefs to the Background⁴⁸ and thus establishes the notion that thoughts are more fundamental than either sentences or statements, which are derivative from thoughts. As understanding a statement *presupposes* a context in order to determine truth conditions, a belief *presupposes* the Background to determine satisfaction conditions. Likewise, both sentences and beliefs that fail to correspond to real objects (e.g. sentences in works of fiction) fail to conform to the trichotomy of true, false, or meaningless and thus need not be meaningless, however they may be underdetermined.

⁴⁸ See *Intentionality*(1983). Searle discusses Russell's classic example of 'The present King of France is Bald' where Searle says "...the statement that the King of France is bald cannot be true, because there is no King of France", pp. 17-18.

Searle's appeal to the Background in the determination of truth conditions might be plausibly traced to Strawson's idea of presupposition. Searle's use of 'presupposition' to explain the Background describes a relation of dependence on a type of context in order for any statement to have truth conditions/conditions-of-satisfaction that can be determinable. Since Searle stresses that language is derivative from thought, in order for *any* thought to be true or false, or for any intentional state's conditions of satisfaction to be met, one must presuppose an appropriate context (Background) that would allow for the truth or falsity of thoughts to be determined. Otherwise, Searle asserts, an intentional state would not only lack conditions of satisfaction, the intentional state itself could never begin to be intelligible. The use of a sentence presupposes a context to determine its truth or falsity just as an intentional state presupposes a background to determine whether or not conditions of satisfaction are being met.

It is true that, from habit, we tend to have a common understanding of the meaning of literal sentences that does not depend on actual context. We also 'understand' a literal sentence when stated without presuppositions being exhaustively spelled out. But, as Searle asserts, this understanding is possible because of Background presuppositions.⁴⁹ However, the investigation into what is presupposed, for Searle, inevitably ends in a regress. Any other statement that would be made to account for a presupposition would lead to another presupposition and so on. Interestingly, Searle rejects the term 'presupposition' in the service of explaining the elements within the Background given its intentional overtones⁵⁰ (i.e. 'presupposition' implies

⁴⁹ Searle, J. *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), p. 184.

⁵⁰ See discussion in chapter 4 below.

representational content). Nevertheless, Strawson's idea of presupposition survives as the overarching model of how action, language, and thought are related to the Background. What testifies to this point is Searle's explanation on how our actions, and the fact that we have representations, "presupposes the preintentional realism of the Background."⁵¹ This could be said to be Strawson's presupposition on a grand scale. In order to determine that anything may be true or false presupposes external realism. That is, that the real world exists apart from our representations of it.

3.3 Searle and Wittgenstein

Searle often refers to Wittgenstein and his examples and many of these references have explanatory significance for the 'Background'. For example, Searle uses Wittgenstein's well-known example of a picture of a man walking uphill as a way one can "think naively of the Background". He says that this picture "could be interpreted as a man sliding backward downhill. Nothing internal to the picture, even construed as a pictorial representation of a man in that position, forces the interpretation we find natural."⁵² It is possible that the man could be interpreted as sliding backwards down the hill, but the situation of a man sliding down a hill is unusual, difficult, and dangerous and thus not a natural interpretation of the picture. Much the same way we naturally understand the sentence 'The cat is on the mat' without thoughts of gravity failing, we naturally understand the man is walking up the hill. Searle says that Wittgenstein's

⁵¹ See Searle Searle's vexed discussion of his 'realism' argument in *Intentionality* (1983) pp.158-59. See also Barry Stroud's critique of Searle's argument in his article "The Background of Thought", pp.245-258 in *John Searle and his Critics* (1991).

⁵² Searle, J. *Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), p.177

example shows the “idea of the Background is that what goes for the picture goes for intentionality in general”. The Background, as it were, determines the natural interpretation of this picture. In this general way, Searle’s use of Wittgenstein does not seem to be inconsistent with his example, and it does elucidate somewhat what the Background does. However, as we will eventually see, there are differing views between these philosophers making the comparison between them more difficult. .

What is interesting is the present encomium given to Wittgenstein contrasts with the lack of acknowledgement of Grice and Strawson. Searle finds great similarity between his Background theory and parts of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. So much so that Searle remarks, “the work of the later Wittgenstein is in large part about the Background.”⁵³ In a footnote to this statement, almost as an afterthought, he remarks that Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* is, “one of the best books on the subject”.⁵⁴ Even though the Background was never actually a ‘subject’ for Wittgenstein, Searle’s Background theory appears to be very similar to Wittgenstein’s later work, including *On Certainty*.

But first, in *Philosophical Investigations* we see Wittgenstein distinguish elements similar to those found in Searle’s Background. One concept that certainly parallels Searle’s Background argument is that of ‘language games’,⁵⁵ the structure of which allows one to understand, for example, the literal meaning of sentences and always involves what can be understood as ‘tacit presuppositions’. Another of Wittgenstein’s notions that is similar to Searle’s notion of Background is ‘form of life.’⁵⁶ It can be

⁵³ Searle, J. *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), p.177.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁵⁵ See Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), p.179, 180

⁵⁶ See Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), passages 19, 23, and 241. As well, see pp. 174, 226.

roughly compared to Searle's understanding of 'local Background'. The features of a 'form of life' and local Background include what is implicit to local cultural practices that allow the involvement in the subtleties of language-games. Yet another notion that broadly parallels the Background is Wittgenstein's notion of 'the natural history of human beings which can be likened to Searle's understanding of 'deep background', or, in other words, things common to all human beings, including walking, drinking, eating, playing.⁵⁷ All these notions of Wittgenstein, taken all together, broadly compare to the elements of the Background. However, an overarching problem exists between the two philosophers that hinders their comparison. First, it seems best to look at Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* to see that Searle's claim is right that it is 'one of the best books on the subject' of the Background.

On Certainty is a work dedicated to an analysis of knowledge, belief, and skepticism. Akin to Searle, Wittgenstein characterizes certainties as nonepistemic, nonpropositional attitudes that, as such, have no verbal occurrence but manifest themselves exclusively in our actions. Much like the approach Searle takes when discussing our natural understanding of 'the cat is on the mat' as not violating some law of gravity, etc., Wittgenstein examines our natural conviction about certain empirical truths. For example, Wittgenstein discusses whether or not he might have been abducted from the earth without his knowing. What Wittgenstein arrives at runs parallel to Searle's description of the Background:

Might I believe that once, without knowing it, perhaps in a state of unconsciousness, I was taken far away from the earth—that other people

⁵⁷ Compare Searle's *Intentionality* (1983), pp. 143, 144 with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), passages 25 and 415.

even know this, but do not mention it to me? But this would not fit into the rest of my convictions at all. Not that I could describe the system of these convictions. Yet my convictions do form a system, a structure. (*OC*, 102)

Such a ludicrous thought of being kidnapped, like the strange scenarios thought up for ‘the cat is on the mat’, do not fit within his system of beliefs. Like Searle’s Network and Background, the ‘system’ has a ‘structure’ that escapes meaningful or exhaustive description. In the next passage, we find anticipations of Searle’s Background:

And now if I were to say ‘It is my unshakeable conviction that etc.’, this means in the present case too that I have not consciously arrived at the conviction by following a particular line of thought, but that it is anchored in all my *questions and answers*, so anchored that I cannot touch it. (*OC*, 103)

Wittgenstein’s explanation of our natural ‘convictions’ (i.e. assumptions, presuppositions) that belong to our ‘system’ that has ‘structure’ are not tapped into consciously through some particular explicit line of thought. They are, as Searle recognizes too, a precondition to our understanding; they are what make possible questions and answers. They, as it were, ‘anchor’ our arguments. It is in this way that they cannot be ‘touched’, because they usually never become the subject of examination or inquiry, precisely because they are presupposed in any such inquiry.

Wittgenstein remarks that this system of convictions is the “essence of what we call arguments”, and “the element in which arguments have their life.” (*OC*, 105) He depicts this system as largely inherited, accepted, and acquired through ‘swallowing’ it down whole. He states that it is “the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.” (*OC*, 94) (cf. Searle’s use of presupposition) As we can see, these passages converge with those found articulating Searle’s Background. Likewise,

Wittgenstein explains that these convictions make possible our arguments, our propositions, precisely because they act as anchors, as hinges, as assumptions that are always already up and running. Contrary to Searle, however, this goes to the transcendental status of background. It is transcendental in that it is the condition of setting out the 'language game'. Similar to Searle, and Ryle (as we will see later), these propositions are ones that are not always explicitly learned:

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can *discover* them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility. (*OC*, 152)

These 'propositions' form a framework, and this framework is largely out of sight. Just as studying the Background⁵⁸ reveals things that were once taken for granted, the 'framework propositions' may be subsequently discovered.

Wittgenstein characterizes these implicit 'framework propositions' as having the certainty of logical truths without actually being logical truths. The framework provides conditions of intelligibility that cannot be called into question without forsaking what hangs on the framework. Framework propositions, such as ones that describe the continuity of nature, or the ones that describe the fact that material things do not cease to exist without physical cause, they belong to a 'system'. Wittgenstein makes the following observation:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the nature of what we call an argument. The system is not so

⁵⁸ See Searle's *Intentionality* (1983), p.155 where he explains how one could go about studying the Background.

much the point of departure as the element in which arguments have their life. (OC, 105)

Thus, these ‘framework propositions’ provide the structure for meaning in arguments and questions. Also, these propositions are natural to our arguments. The system provides boundaries outside of which questions cease to be fully meaningful. This, among other things, sounds analogous to the Background. All throughout *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein raises questions, makes comments, and uses vocabulary that narrow in on an understanding similar to Searle’s Background. Insofar as Wittgenstein anticipates the many arguments that Searle uses to explain his theory, Wittgenstein elucidates a concept that incorporates these considerations into a general, multifaceted picture of how we act in the world. His discussions with his interlocutor result in the recognition that humans act and operate always already accepting certain implicit propositions, operate without explicit grounds, and that these propositions form a web, not unlike Searle’s Network and Background, to which we hold fast.

3.3.1 The notion of a background as a practice, not a mental capacity

Searle settles on describing the Background as shared ‘capacities’ and ‘practices’ even though these descriptions of the Background, Searle says, do not adequately describe the Background because they “fail to convey an appropriate implication that the phenomena are mental”⁵⁹. By ‘mental’, Searle means that these ‘capacities’ and ‘practices’ are caused by some neurophysiological disposition of the ‘mind-brain’. However, this understanding of what the Background is is certainly different from Wittgenstein’s notions of a background.

When discussing the significance of framework propositions in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein explains that they are objective and social. They are independent of us in that they preceded us as part of the world that we inherit. In this respect, framework propositions, much as with his account of ‘language games’ and ‘form of life’,⁶⁰ are not a matter of epistemic ‘satisfaction’, they are given. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes:

[But] I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (*OC*, 94)

Like Searle, Wittgenstein points out here that one’s picture of the world, or background, is inherited, but, unlike Searle, not in a neurophysiological sense (as though the meanings of framework propositions were inherited genetically). If anything, Wittgenstein is describing something that is a cultural or social phenomenon and brain states do not account for these sorts of things. Since it makes no sense to speak of Wittgenstein’s framework propositions as neurophysiological, without some detriment to the

⁵⁹ Searle, J. *Intentionality*, p. 156.

⁶⁰ See Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), passages 19, 23, and especially 241.

understanding of the expression, it equally makes no sense to speak of the Background as being Wittgensteinian, at least to the extent that Searle's broad encomium has implied. Searle is not fully entitled to the claim that *On Certainty* is one of the best books on the subject of the Background. His claim is not just anachronistic; it is an uncharacteristic citing of a precedent. What can be gathered from Wittgenstein is that 'forms of life', 'natural history of human beings', and 'world picture propositions' are meaning-laden, and cannot be explained or understood by reference to the brain. That said, nobody disputes that to be conscious, you need a brain. However, it is invalid to think that every notable fact about our lives constitutes a brain fact, which seems to be the line of thought that Searle is following.

Despite the recurring problem of reconciling Searle's neurophysiologicalism with the ideas Wittgenstein discusses in *On Certainty* and elsewhere, Wittgenstein does touch on other definitive characteristics of a Searlian Background. Consider the following passage:

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning explicit rules. (*OC*, 95)

Both Wittgenstein and Searle give a story of meaning that has both implicit and explicit dimensions. Here, Wittgenstein's characterization of what is implicit is proposition-like and that implies meaning, but without explicit directives. Similarly, Searle's characterization of what is implicit is that they are capacities always already there. However, Searle's use of 'capacity' does not convey as clearly the idea of content that Wittgenstein's 'framework propositions' does. Consequently, Searle's 'capacities' do not remain within the realm of meaning or normativity. Recall Searle's first analogy that he

used to help explain how the Background works.⁶¹ When the skier gets better, any explicit rules become progressively irrelevant. The role the following of explicit rules once played is replaced by something else. Wittgenstein and Searle both recognize something that fills that role, and it is instinctual, primal, and natural. For Searle, however, it also means that it is neurophysiological. Searle seems to construe, what Wittgenstein refers to as ‘learned purely practical, without specific rules’, as really just a capacity of the mind (a physicalistic explanation). What has meaning and is content-laden for Wittgenstein is reduced to brain states in Searle. Searle’s reduction seems to undermine the meaningful role the Background, like framework propositions, is supposed to play.

Wittgenstein says that what lies at the foundation of well-founded belief is a belief, or number of beliefs, that are themselves “not founded”⁶². For Wittgenstein, beliefs ‘not founded’ do not merely escape full explanation or determination- they *do not require* full explanation or determination. Like Searle’s description of how we understand literal meaning, we can function without doubting and yet can give no adequate grounds for, say, the use of words in a language. Wittgenstein writes:

And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, have no doubt about it, I can still give no *grounds* for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for. (*PI*, 307)

For Wittgenstein, any attempt at verifying one’s understanding of literal meaning leads to a myriad of explanations that do not add to the certainty experienced the moment the

⁶¹ See Searle’s *Intentionality* (1983), p.150 for Searle’s full account of skiing.

⁶² Wittgenstein, L. *On Certainty* (1969), p. 33e (253)

word is used. Here, Wittgenstein gives an explanation similar to Searle's explanation of literal meaning, but Searle cannot suppose that one could start talking about the brain here. Normative meanings, like the meanings of words, have to make sense to us, and this is not the business of neurophysiology. However, broadly speaking, Searle and Wittgenstein agree that the regress does not occur, and for similar reasons. For Wittgenstein, it is because of our 'form of life' that the regress does not occur. For Searle, it is because of the Background. Although broadly similar, these two concepts are significantly different. This is revealed in the way the regress is construed, and what could possibly stop it.

For Wittgenstein, a regress is not really a serious problem because, though without grounds, meaning is still available through our 'form of life'. Thus, the regress can be stopped within the paradigm of meaning and content. This is because his certainty of words, for example, is a part of the context around him and is part of his social situatedness. However, it seems Searle finds that the regress is a serious problem that needs to be dealt with outside of the realm of meaning because, to be 'certain' cannot be a matter of 'being explainable'. What 'makes sense' to Searle can only be construed as being explainable, and thus representational/intentional. Thus the converse is the case. If certainty cannot be, so to speak, explained into existence, then it can neither be representational, nor intentional. The fear of the regress comes from the fear of a reality where nothing is fully explainable.⁶³ In order to circumvent the alternative of a possibly infinite regress, Searle characterizes the Background as being 'preintentional' or

⁶³ See *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), 109 where Wittgenstein says: "... We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place." Also see in volume one of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (1980), 509: "*Not* to explain, but to *accept* the psychological phenomenon—that is what is difficult."

‘nonintentional’; however, if we seriously consider Wittgenstein’s idea that no grounds can be given in order to clarify or add certainty to the use of words or sentences, what more explanation could the invocation of a neurophysiological Background filled with nonintentional ‘assumptions’ and ‘capacities’ give? It seems that Searle has replaced an uncertain explanation with an appeal to the Background, which is really an appeal to neurophysiology that is equally uncertain (unintelligible), if not more so. The difficulty, it seems, is how Searle poses the problem. For Wittgenstein, the ability to question or doubt is afforded to us by our contextual, social, normative situatedness and this is where questioning and doubt begin.

For Searle, there is no question about where questioning and doubt begin, and our certainty is not a matter of stable belief, but it seems it is a matter of neurophysiologically suspended disbelief. Suspended disbelief, in terms of suspended regressive representation, brings with it the threat that, without some mitigating factor, in this case the Background—the regress would overwhelm us. Wittgenstein makes no argument like this, and does not appeal to a neurophysiological Background because the ‘threat’ of a regress does not involve a situation where certainty itself is defined by being available and explainable in explicit terms, all at once and in the same way. Certainty, for Wittgenstein, involves all that is inherited and given in a ‘form of life’ and nothing more, and it makes us able to be certain of things.

3.4 Searle and Ryle

In *Intentionality*, Searle, among his several terms used to describe the Background, uses some terms that point directly to the work of Gilbert Ryle. Searle likely came in contact with Ryle's work when they were both at Oxford during the fifties and sixties: Ryle as a professor and Searle as a student.

In order to see Ryle's influence, one need only look at the beginning of Searle's discussion of the Background in *Intentionality*. Here, we see an example of Searle's use of distinctly Rylean terminology. Under the heading "What Exactly is Meant By 'The Background'?" Searle uses the distinctions of 'knowing-how' and 'knowing-that' as aids to his description of the Background:

In order that I can have the Intentional states that I do I must have certain kinds of know-how: I must know how things are and I must know how to do things, but the kinds of 'know-how' in questions are not, in these cases, forms of 'knowing that'.⁶⁴

Thus, the Background is described as a certain type of 'know-how' and can be understood as a collection of capacities to do one thing or another. Knowing-that, on the other hand, has more to do with knowing about certain things, facts, rules, and states of affairs.

'Knowing-how' and 'knowing-that' are terms that almost certainly Searle has learned from Ryle and felt no need to cite him.⁶⁵ In Ryle's famous work, *The Concept of*

⁶⁴ Searle, J. *Intentionality* (1983), p. 143.

⁶⁵ See Gilbert Ryle. *The Concept of Mind* (1949), pp. 25-61.

Mind (1949), Ryle makes the same sort of distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that:

We speak of learning how to play an instrument as well as of learning that something is the case; of finding out how to prune trees as well as finding out the Romans had a camp in a certain place; of forgetting how to tie a reef-knot as well as forgetting that the German for 'knife' is 'Messer'. We can wonder *how* as well as wonder *whether*.⁶⁶

It would seem that knowing-how, in Ryle's sense, involves competencies of human action, which is strikingly similar to Searle's usage of the term as a description of the content of the Background.

What is even more compelling is the apparent similarity between Searle's project and that of Ryle's. The 'traditional cognitivist view' that Searle's account of the Background opposes is strikingly similar to the 'Intellectualist Legend' viewpoint that Gilbert Ryle attacks with his distinction of 'knowing-how' and 'knowing-that'. When describing how we acquire physical skills, such as skiing, Searle outlines what he calls the 'traditional cognitivist view':

Skiing is one of those skills which is learned with the aid of explicit representations. But after a while the skier gets better; he no longer needs to remind himself of the instructions, he just goes out and skies. According to the traditional cognitivist view, the instructions become internalized and now function unconsciously but still as representations... [However] As the skier gets better he does not internalize the rules better, but rather the rules become progressively irrelevant. The rules do not become 'wired in' as unconscious intentional contents, but repeated experiences create physical capacities, presumably realized as neural pathways, that make the rules simply irrelevant. 'Practice makes perfect' not because practice results in a perfect memorization of the rules, but because repeated practice enables the body to take over and the rules recede into the Background.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁷ Searle, J. *Intentionality* (1983), p. 150.

Thus, Searle rejects the idea that we go through an active review and explicit reapplication of instructions when we perform some act like skiing (and that a better way to explain it does not include characterizing movements in strict and explicit accordance with rules). This sounds very similar to the complaint that Ryle makes against those he calls ‘Intellectualists’ who adhere to the ‘Intellectualists Legend’ and try to blur the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that by describing the performance of acts similarly to Searle’s cognitivists. Ryle writes:

Champions of this legend are apt to try to reassimilate knowing *how* to knowing *that* by arguing that intelligent performance involves the observance of rules, or the application of criteria; that is the agent must first go through the internal process of avowing to himself certain propositions about what is to be done (‘maxims’, ‘imperatives’ or ‘regulative propositions’ as they are sometimes called); only then can he execute his performance in accordance with those dictates.⁶⁸

Instead of, as it were, explaining knowing-how as being the observance of several knowing-thats, Ryle wants to make clear that the exercise of intelligence in practice “cannot be analyzed into a tandem operation of first considering prescriptions and then executing them” (p.40), and “When I am doing something intelligently, i.e. thinking what I am doing, I am doing one thing and not two. My performance has a special procedure, not special antecedents.” (p.32) His reasons for this position are many, and they stem from common-sense examples showing that “[k]nowing how to apply maxims cannot be reduced to, or derived from, the acceptance of those or any other maxims.” (p.31)

⁶⁸Ryle, G. *The Concept of Mind* (1949), p.29.

With striking resemblance to Searle, Ryle raises a type of Searlian regress argument that functions to show that the intellectualist's version of how intelligent actions are performed is absurd. Beginning with a description of the crucial objection against the 'intellectualist legend' (an analogue of Searle's objection to both literal atomist⁶⁹ and cognitivist views), Ryle writes:

The crucial objection to the intellectualist legend is this. The consideration of propositions is itself an operation the execution of which can be more or less intelligent, less or more stupid. But if, for any operation to be intellectually executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be preformed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle... Let us consider some salient points at which this regress would arise. According to the legend, whenever an agent does anything intelligently, his act is preceded and steered by another internal practical problem. But what makes him consider the one maxim which is appropriate rather than any of the thousands which are not? Why does the hero not find himself calling to mind a cooking-recipe, or a rule of Formal Logic? Perhaps he does, but then his intellectual process is silly and not sensible. Intelligently reflecting how to act is, among other things, considering what is pertinent and disregarding what is inappropriate. Must we then say that for the hero's reflections how to act to be intelligent he must first reflect how best to reflect how to act? The endlessness of this implied regress shows that the application of the criterion of appropriateness does not entail the occurrence of a process of considering this criterion.⁷⁰

Searle's case for our understanding literal meaning plays out, much like this case, complete with the pressures of an infinite regress argument and the counter-intuitive alternative of 'silly' logic. Searle introduces the Background as a mental phenomenon to explain why this does not happen in order to deflate what he sees as the purported

⁶⁹ Recall the atomist view of literal meaning first explored by Searle in his paper "Literal Meaning" (1979) and examined in the second chapter in this thesis.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30-31.

distinction between the mental and the physical.⁷¹ This, however, is just an objection to the supernatural causes and not an objection to causalism. He declares all talk about what is ‘in the head’ as akin to talking about ‘special-status phantasms’ that are as mysterious as the Cartesian soul. Nevertheless, Searle’s theory of Intentionality, including his work on the Background, embraces the idea that the Background enables, that is causes, mental phenomena (i.e. intentionality).

While reading Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* one gets the impression that Searle’s theory of the Background is less Wittgensteinian and more an homage to Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*. One notices that Searle’s examples often share family resemblances to Ryle bordering upon identical twin status, but their resemblance becomes downgraded to fraternal when one considers their respective conclusions. While the similarities abound, Searle, on the one hand, tries to drive home the idea of a mental life that involves the Background. Ryle, on the other hand, unfairly considered a behaviourist by Searle, wants to do away with the ‘mental’ distinction because it is just as mysterious as the Cartesian soul.

Alas, although he seems to borrow heavily from Ryle, Searle discounts him because he thinks Ryle’s dismissal of the idea that thinking happens ‘in the head’ commits Ryle to some form of “behaviourism”⁷². Ryle, however, plainly rejects the mechanistic doctrine of a behaviourist, but at the same time does not believe thoughts are ‘in the head’, thus rejecting a doctrine of intelligent actions that includes an account of brain states. This is because of the fact that he feels that any causal account of behaviour,

⁷¹ See Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (1949), p. 40, where Ryle declares “it is part of the function of this book to show that exercises of qualities of mind do not, save *per accidens*, take place ‘in the head’, in the ordinary sense of the phrase, and those which do so have no special priority over those which do not.”

⁷² See Searle’s *Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), p. 33. Searle lumps Ryle in with the ‘logical behaviourists’.

whether the cause is the soul or a brain, is misconceived. Ryle's account holds that 'mental' properties or exercises of qualities of mind do not occur 'in the head' in any brain.

One would think that, on any other day, Searle would be completely sympathetic to Ryle and his conclusions. However, it seems that this is not the case because of Searle's preoccupation with both Intentionality *and* the neurophysiological. The difference between Ryle and Searle is their conception of how mind relates to behaviour. For Ryle it is not causal but conceptual. Searle is hard-pressed to intelligibly explain a conceptual relationship between the Background and the mind if all he has available to him, in the end, is the brute, causal happenings of the brain. This is evident in the way he sets out his explanation of the Background, which is examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Searle's conflicted doctrine

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I attempt to show that Searle's Background is a conflicted doctrine. This discussion limits itself to three canonical texts that deal exclusively with the Background. These texts include chapter five of *Intentionality* (1983), entitled 'The Background', an article by Barry Stroud entitled 'The Background of Thought' and Searle's reply, both found in *John Searle and his Critics* (1991), and finally I will discuss the chapter in *Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992) where Searle focuses on the Background.

Throughout chapters two and three of this thesis, I have presented the view that the problem with Searle's account is its direction towards the neurophysiological as an explanation of the Background, but this is merely a symptom of the real problem. The real problem is that Searle tries to give a non-intentional account of intentionality. He thinks that any successful account of intentionality must refer only to the non-intentional. His direction shows that Searle is not prepared to accept that intentionality is primitive and irreducible. What run parallel with his problematic account are his conflicted use of certain terms, and his conspicuous misuse of others.

Searle and Wittgenstein share many important similarities when it comes to talking about a background. Both entertain regress type problems that lead both to their own type of background. Wittgenstein's problem involves rule following and interpretation, and this is analogous to Searle's problem which involves intentionality and representations. Wittgenstein's dilemma is that one cannot explain rule-following as a matter of the interpretation of the rule, by appealing to a previous interpretation. Searle's dilemma is that one cannot explain intentionality as a matter of representation, by appealing to a previous representation. However, Searle and Wittgenstein disagree on what solution the regress problem prescribes. On the one hand, Wittgenstein's dilemma shows him that what is 'previous' is not an interpretation. He thinks that, if that is the case, then there must be a kind of rule following that is non-interpretive. On the other hand, Searle's dilemma shows him that what is 'previous' is not only not a representation, but it isn't intentional either. This is because Searle believes that the representational is coextensive with the intentional. Thus, what is representational is intentional, and conversely, what is non-representational must also be non-intentional. For Searle, the non-intentional is construed causally and this is where Wittgenstein departs from Searle.

Searle contends that he is in agreement with Wittgenstein when it comes to what he says about the Background, but Searle is not fully entitled to this. Although it is true that both respond to a regress dilemma, or problem, they differ in what they think the regress dictates. For Searle, the feared regress in the explanation of the intentional can be stopped only by going outside the intentional. That is, once you go outside the intentional, the regress problem is solved. Wittgenstein offers the different solution that

one need not look outside the intentional to stop the regress. His account shows that one need only allow for other forms of intentionality (forms that do not require representations to function) in order to stop the regress. The Background, for both philosophers, describes what is given, and that is what stops the regress. On the one hand, what is given for Wittgenstein is 'forms of life'. On the other hand, what is given for Searle is neurophysiology. Nevertheless, 'Forms of life' are normative, while neurophysiology can only be thought of as causal, lacking any appropriate explanation of the normative.

Searle would have it that the relation found between the Background and Intentionality is the same found between the brain and Intentionality. This is a causal explanation, but because of the intentional overtones involved in his account, he cannot completely de-intentionalize the Background. Furthermore, it is not clear how one could intelligibly connect a completely non-intentional Background to intentionality anyway. Thus, Searle's notion of the Background is conflicted. If intentionality is explainable in non-intentional terms, it is not irreducible; it can be reduced to the non-intentional. However, Searle's conflicted account of the Background shows that the explanation of intentionality cannot be a reductive explanation. Thus, there is the overriding issue of the irreducibility of the intentional. This issue comes out in many different instances of conflictedness within Searle's account of the Background, and they all trace back to the overriding problem that the account of intentionality cannot be reduced to non-intentional, neurophysiological, and thus causal, explanations. Intentionality really is a primitive, irreducible phenomenon.

The fact that Searle's theory is conflicted is evident in the way he presents it. Right through its presentation, Searle ambivalently admits to certain problems, unabashedly uses oxymoronic terminology, and gives unconvincing excuses for doing so. He admits to a morass, and yet persists in his conflicted direction. As the weight of his conflicted baggage gets heavier, he seems to become more determined to continue along the same path.

I will begin with a discussion of chapter five in *Intentionality*, next I will discuss the exchange between Searle and Barry Stroud, and then I will discuss the chapter in *Rediscovery of the Mind* where Searle, after receiving a lot of criticism, attempts to clean up his theory, but fails to acknowledge or address the most important aspects of Stroud's criticisms.

4.2 Chapter five of *Intentionality*: “The Background”

In chapter five of *Intentionality*, entitled “The Background”, Searle concedes much of what is leveled against him above. In the section entitled “Why are we having so much trouble describing the Background or even in getting a neutral terminology for describing it? And why, indeed, does our terminology always look ‘representational’?” Searle admits that he finds it difficult to describe the elements of the Background. He admits that his use of the words ‘assumptions’ and ‘presuppositions’ is misleading, and that they must be ‘literally wrong’ because they “imply the apparatus of representation” (p.156). In an attempt to modify and qualify these admittedly defective terms, he concessively prefaces them with, what he calls, the “apparently oxymoronic ‘preintentional’” (p.156). However, expressions like ‘preintentional assumptions’ are not

apparently oxymoronic, they are oxymoronic, but that does not stop Searle from using them. His use of these expressions is a sign of his conflictedness, because someone driven to use oxymoronic expressions is someone being pulled into two different directions.

Even with these terms prefaced, they fail to convey what exactly Searle means, even if they do begin to convey his chronic conflictedness. Instead, he adopts the expressions ‘capacities’ and ‘practices’, because, he supposes, they have less representational, thus intentional, baggage: “My prefaced expressions are ‘capacities’ and ‘practices’, since these can *succeed or fail* without being themselves representational” (p.156, my italics). But, in spite of himself, Searle is letting slip here that there is more to capacities and practices than representation and that there is a dimension of intentionality that is not representational. Succeeding or failing is a normative notion, and can’t be explained causally. Although it may be true that these preferred expressions are less representational, this does not mean that they are less intentionally, teleologically, purposively, or contentfully laden, so as to end the regress as Searle conceives it.

Nevertheless, Searle finds these terms “inadequate since they fail to convey an appropriate implication that the phenomena are explicitly mental” (p.156). In section III of chapter five entitled “In What Sense is the Background Mental?” Searle has a physicalistic understanding of what it means for the Background to be mental. He says that the Background is “a set of skills, stances, preintentional assumptions and presuppositions, practices and habits. And all of these, as far as we know, are realized in human brains and bodies.” (p.154) This means that the Background is really a brain thing, but the brain is a causal thing, and causal sequences cannot explain the normative

aspects of the Background. Nevertheless, at this stage, it is difficult to get a sense of what an ‘explicitly mental’ explanation for the phenomena within the Background would even look like, and this is made worse by Searle’s own words. First of all, he admits that the Background can’t be fully understood as mental (See p.154 where he concedes that Heidegger’s notions of the background have some truth to them). Second of all, while his preferred terms ‘capacities’ and ‘practices’ are deemed sufficiently non-representational, they fail to be descriptive of the ‘explicitly mental’ Background Searle feels he needs to explain. For Searle, these terms succeed in conveying Background-like phenomena without ‘representational’ overtones, and it is remarkable that this fact does not signal for him the possibility that the Background, while remaining non-representational, might just be a different form of intentionality and not a completely non-intentional phenomenon.

Searle attempts to sweep all of these problems under the rug by laying the blame on the nature of language. He claims that it fails to convey what he means by the Background because language, as preeminently intentional, cannot serve to convey its pre-intentional conditions (the Background). He tries to bolster his claims about the failure of language by suggesting that when we reflect on the Background there is a ‘temptation’ to think that ‘our representations are of representations’. He gives the example:

Eating lunch in a restaurant, I am surprised when I lift my mug of beer by its near weightlessness. Inspection reveals that the thick mug is not glass, but plastic. We would naturally say I believed that the mug is not glass but plastic. We would naturally say that I *believed* that the mug was made of glass, and I *expected* it to be heavy. But that is wrong. In the sense in which I really do believe without ever having explicitly thought about it that interest rates will go down and I really do expect a break in the current heat wave, I had no expectations and beliefs about the mug; I simply acted.(p.157).

But, if one is surprised, that can't be incompatible with simply acting. Nevertheless, Searle blames language. He explains:

Ordinary usage invites us to, and we can and we do, treat elements of the Background as if they were representations, but it does not follow from that, nor is it the case that, when these elements are functioning they function as representations. The price we pay for deliberately going against ordinary language is metaphor, oxymoron, and outright neologism (p.157).

Certainly, Searle does unabashedly use oxymoronic terminology, but this is not a fault of language, it is the fault of his conflicted theory. The problem is not ordinary usage, it is Searle's imagined assumption that 'expectation' involves representation and that a belief involves representation, but this is a projection of his dogmatic view. This is why Searle says it is wrong to say that I 'expected' the mug to be heavier; however, it is only wrong if expectation can only be understood in terms of his 'representational/intentional' paradigm. However, the mug-lifter type of expectation, while not a representation, is certainly intentional, teleological, purposive, and reflective of an overall intentional (in terms of being 'about' something) outlook a human or animal could have.

Regardless, it doesn't seem to bother him to use all of these rejected inadequate terms altogether to describe the Background, but this vain attempt to overcome the inadequacies of language just adds to Searle's conflictedness, in more ways than one. The key to seeing this conflictedness, as we have already seen, is to look at what Searle says about how the Background works. Although it is true that the elements of the Background do not 'function as representations', it is now difficult for Searle to express fully and unconflictedly the nature of this functioning. The original rationale for the Background was explained as: 'only against' a background can literal meanings be

‘fixed’ or understood.⁷³ It was clear that that involved normative notions. To understand literal meanings is to understand ‘only against’ a social, linguistic, normative context that would make them understandable *as* literal.⁷⁴ Normativity inevitably involves some value notions of right versus wrong, success versus failure. To ‘fix’ a literal meaning means to get it right. Expressions like ‘against which’, ‘enabling’ and ‘fixing’, which Searle often uses to characterize the relationship between the Background and Intentionality, can only be understood in this way. The original rationale for bringing the Background in was that it functioned to normatively ‘fix’ literal meaning. Now, there are seems to be two different notions of how the Background functions. The first, following the original rationale, has it that it functions normatively; the second, has it that it functions causally. These two notions of functioning have cross-purposes, and Searle seems to always slip from the original rationale, which was normative, into causal explanations. This is evident in that Searle always seems to hedge, qualify, and restate his claims, but never succeeds in clarifying the character of the elements within the Background, and this is

⁷³ See in *Intentionality* (1983) where Searle says: “The understanding of literal meaning of sentences, from the simplest sentences, such as ‘The cat is on the mat’, to the most complex sentences of the physical sciences, requires a preintentional Background. For example, the sentence “The cat is on the mat” only determines a definite set of truth conditions *against* a Background of preintentional assumptions that are not part of the literal meaning of the sentence. This is shown by the fact that, if we alter the preintentional Background, the same sentence with the same literal meaning will have different truth conditions, different conditions of satisfaction, even though there is no change in the literal meaning of the sentence. This has the consequence that the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence is not a context-free notion; it only has application *relative to* a set of preintentional Background *assumptions and practices*. (p.146, my italics)

⁷⁴ Consider the following passage in *Intentionality* (1983) where Searle comments on the impact his Background theory has on literal meaning, among other things: “The explanation, I believe, is simple and obvious, but it has far reaching consequences for the classical theory of meaning and understanding. Each of the sentences in the first group is understood within a Network of Intentional states and *against* a Background of capacities and *social practices*. We know how to open doors, books, eyes, wounds and walls; and the differences in the Network and in the Background of practices produce different understandings of the same verb. Furthermore, we simply have no common practices of opening mountains, grass or suns. It would be easy to invent a Background, i.e., to imagine a practice, that would give a clear sense to the idea of opening mountains, grass and suns, but we have no such common Background at present.” (p.147, my italics) But, the question remains, how can a ‘social practice’ be understood as a neurophysiological fact about the brain?

most evident in the next section. In the section entitled “How does the Background work?” Searle attempts to answer the most important, and obvious, question.

He begins by stating that “the Background provides a set of *enabling conditions* that make it possible for particular forms of Intentionality to function.” (p.157, my italics)

In an instance of restatement, he attempts to clarify what ‘enabling conditions’ and ‘function’ mean. Searle offers an analogy:

Just as the Constitution of the United States enables a certain potential candidate to form the intention to become President, and just as the rules of a game enable certain moves to be made in the game, so the Background enables us to have particular forms of Intentionality. (p.157, my italics)

Despite how convinced Searle is of this comparison, his use of ‘enable’ here is ambiguous, and it is not clear what type of enabling he means. If ‘enable’ means to provide that without which nothing could *count* as ‘running for President’ or, therefore, as ‘intending to run for President’, then the enabling must be a normative affair, a providing of meaning and significance. This cannot be a merely external, sequential, causal affair. The Constitution of the United States must itself have meaning in order to be a ‘document’ and apart from that is just a piece of paper, and so no causal reading of how it ‘enables’ one to run for president is really available to us. Yet, he slips and reveals that causally is exactly the way he wants this ‘enabling’ to be understood. He reiterates:

“The Background, to repeat, is not a set of representations, but like the structure of the game or of the Constitution it nonetheless provides a set of enabling conditions.” (p.158)

But this does not further clarify what his previous use of ‘enabling’ was, which seems to have both a normative and a causal meaning. The next sentence gives us his key fudge, and points to the heart of Searle’s conflictedness:

The Background, to repeat, is not a set of representations, but like the structure of the game or of the Constitution it nonetheless provides a set of enabling conditions. The Background functions causally but the causation in question is not determining. In traditional terms, the Background provides necessary but not sufficient conditions for understanding, believing, desiring, intending, etc., and in that sense it is enabling and not determining. (p.158)

But the Constitution is a necessary condition of the intention to run for President by way of being an ‘intelligibility condition’ and it is quite gratuitous to construe this as a causal condition (as, no less, would be construing the fact that the Constitution is a *legal* condition of someone’s running for President as a causal condition of someone’s running for President). Furthermore, brute causal connections are not analogous to the rules of a game or the Constitution of the United States. Searle’s comparison of the Background to these things does not make clear, and does not explain, what ‘enabling while not determining’ means, and he does not provide us with a sense of what it could possibly mean. And this is, perhaps, because he doesn’t think he has to. His use of systematically ambiguous language allows him to construe the Background as causal, but with normative overtones. However, this is essentially an attempt to mix oil and water.

4.3 Searle and Stroud

One philosopher who identifies Searle's conflictedness is Barry Stroud. In the collection of articles entitled *John Searle and his Critics*, Stroud's article "The Background of Thought" touches on many issues regarding Searle's Background theory and points out the real problem behind it, making Searle's direction towards the neurophysiological a symptom of a much more insidious problem rooted in spurious presuppositions. The result is Searle's conflicted Background, born from his desire to provide a non-intentional explanation of intentionality.

Following Searle's initial rendition of his argument for the Background in *Intentionality*), but prior to *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Stroud's article outlines the reasons why he suspects Searle's explanation of the Background expresses a dubious demand for the requirement "that all intentional states should be explainable at once, and in the same way." (*John Searle and his Critics*, p.258) Among other things, Stroud questions the validity of this line of explanation (Ibid.). If it is true that intentionality *is* explainable all at once and in the same way then it is reducible. If it *is not* explainable all at once, then one species of the intentional may explain another species while leaving 'the intentional all at once' irreducible. Searle's precept essentially is that it is reducible and that any successful account of intentionality must refer only to the non-intentional. It may be added that what is assumed under this mandate is that all intentionality can be properly characterized as solely representational, and that intentionality cannot be properly thought of as primitive, natural, and/or irreducible. However, Searle does not give adequate reasons for adopting this assumption. Stroud recognizes that it is difficult

for us to grasp what it means to understand intentionality in non-intentional terms precisely because it goes against the role the Background is supposed to play.

Behind Searle's aim to construct a non-intentional account of intentionality is the threat of an infinite regress. Stroud sees Searle as correct in the thought that our behaviour cannot be fully captured and so made intelligible by an appeal to nothing but rules (cf. representations) alone, and concurs that our behaviour could not be *everywhere* governed or guided by rules.

Searle endorses the regress argument and so explicitly rejects the hypothesis that "all Intentionalistic mental life and cognitive capacities could be entirely reduced to representations" (p.152, *Intentionality*). That rejected view he identifies as "the converse" of something he calls "the hypothesis of the Background" which he therefore thinks there are good reasons to accept (p.246, *John Searle and his Critics*).

However, in Stroud's view, the promise of the Background has not been fulfilled. He says:

It is very difficult to describe, and therefore to understand, what sort of thing the 'Background' is supposed to be. I think Searle would be the first to insist that *he has not really been able to explain it satisfactorily so far*. But *he is certain* that it must be there and that it must be acknowledged and incorporated into a full account of human intentionality. And however little is known about it at the moment, *he is certain* that it must be regarded as 'mental'. Failure to understand its nature and operation he finds to be the source of many philosophical problems which, when properly understood, will presumably go away. (p.247, my italics)

I think that this is a fair assessment of Searle's perspective. What is more is that Stroud, too, recognizes how conflicted Searle's overall perspective is. Searle is certain that the Background is indispensable to an adequate account of human intentionality, in spite of the fact he has admitted that his account of the Background is inadequate. It is acceptable to simply take for granted, as Stroud puts it, "the negative thesis that any theory involving

nothing but ‘representations’ or ‘intentional contents’ would be regressive and therefore inadequate.” (p.247), but this thought alone does not force or prove that the Background exists, or that it should be invoked. Furthermore, this thought carries with it the assumption that representations, or intentional contents, exhaustively characterize intentionality itself.

In an attempt to clarify what the Background is, or comprises, Searle uses the terms ‘capacities’ and ‘abilities’ when accounting for certain physical , and verbal, skills. However, as Stroud points out, there are many different ways that one can have a ‘capacity’:

It is certainly true that human beings must have some capacities or abilities in order to do anything, or even to learn to do anything. . . In that sense there are conditions that must be fulfilled if we walk or if we acquire the ability to walk. Those capacities and abilities could therefore perhaps be said to be in the Background of what we do and to make our actions possible. The same is true of speaking a language, expressing our desires, communicating with others, and so on; there too are many conditions that must be fulfilled if we do those things. Of course we can look for the sources or bases of our many capacities—muscle control, reflexes, balance, and so on in the case of walking, and other no doubt complicated features of organism in other cases. But that does not seem to be what Searle has in mind when he speaks of studying the ‘Background’. (p. 247).

The term ‘capacity’, Stroud asserts, is too vague. For example, suppose I have the ‘capacity’ to ski, and I was hog tied at the top of the mountain, or I was enclosed in a plexiglass case too small for me to move my limbs. I would not be able, among other things, to exercise the ‘capacity’ to ski; nevertheless, my neurophysiology would undergo no change or augmentation. The word ‘capacity’ has a meaning that is just too broad, and, as such, hinders clarity. Our doing anything can be preconditioned by many things, and in many ways. Because Searle’s use is systematically ambiguous, Stroud lists both

the causal and the normative as possible candidates for Searle's 'capacities' and 'abilities.' (p. 251), thereby corroborating our diagnosis of Searle as conflicted.

Searle use of the terms 'capacities' and 'abilities' to characterize the Background and the role they play in intentional states is partly the result of the regress argument. As

Stroud agrees:

Learning how to do something cannot be understood as solely a matter of 'internalizing' a set of rules or instructions which become increasingly unconscious while functioning as 'representations' from which we read off what we are supposed to do. That view does seem clearly unacceptable, but what makes it unacceptable appears to be the threat of a regress. 'Representations' or rules alone could never be enough without further rules for applying them. (p. 247)

No doubt, explicit rules, functioning as representations, cannot account for what a person does. However, it is not that they "recede into a 'Background' at all; they simply play no explanatory role in an account of what the person is doing or how he learns". (p.248)

Thus, an acceptance of the Background is not forced by the threat of a regress because:

The threat of a regress undermines the idea that our intentional activities are guided by the 'Background' just as it does the idea that that they are guided by rules or 'representations' alone. It implies that, in general, our mental activities are not in the relevant sense guided by anything at all. (p.249)

This shows that, at some point, representations cannot account fully for our intentional life, but, as Stroud might have gone on to argue, that point does not force the idea that intentionality must be accounted for non-intentionally. It simply shows that an account of intentionality can't be fully understood through the representational paradigm (or a

‘paradigm of guiding’). In other words, when the question is what makes intentionality possible, there is a false choice between a regress and a non-intentional Background.

Representation is not exhaustive of intentionality, and thus, though explaining representations by appeal to something representational will be regressive, explaining representation by something otherwise intentional need not be regressive (or perniciously so). There is more to the intentional than merely the representational. There is, to cite Searle’s example, the ‘structure’ of a game or a Constitution. As Searle notes, these are not a set of representations, but as normative phenomena comprising rules and purposes they *are*, in a broader sense, intentional phenomena. Moreover, only as such broadly intentional and normative phenomena do they ‘enable’ various representations, but, contrary to Searle, this enabling is not any sort of *causing*, either ‘determining’ or ‘non-determining’ (whatever the latter might mean).

Searle thinks his Background theory is in line with certain views of Wittgenstein, but there is evidence that it, in fact, conflicts with his views. If we look at later Wittgenstein, we can see that Searle’s obeisance to the regress argument goes against Wittgenstein’s sense of rule following, and where Searle looks towards a non-intentional explanation, Wittgenstein gives an explanation rich with intentional content, purpose, and custom. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to master a technique.” (*PI*, 199). This, of course, applies to all that could be construed as being part of Searle’s Background. However, Wittgenstein has an important explanation of rule following that suggests that he disagrees with Searle’s understanding of intentionality:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying a rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases.

Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term 'interpretation' to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another. (*PI*, 201)

Wittgenstein observes that the regress argument shows that rule following is not essentially a question of interpretation at all, 'interpretation' being a species of 'representation'. It is a type of 'grasping' that is not an interpretation. Thus, the regress argument, as a problem of interpretation, has no bearing on how rule following is possible. From Wittgenstein's point of view, it would seem, the regress argument only shows that the 'grasping' is not a matter of representations. As a result, Wittgenstein shows that there is a type of intentionality, a type of grasping, which is not a matter of representations, or representations of representations. Thus, Searle's claim that the regress argument requires a non-intentional Background conflicts with Wittgenstein.

What is also important in Wittgenstein's position is that what he calls the 'grasping' of a rule is part of a practice which is characteristically an external, meaning social and contextual, matter. In the passage following 201, Wittgenstein writes:

And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it. (*PI*, 202)

To 'obey a rule' is defined by a practice that makes available not only the tools for scrutinizing behaviour, but also the sense in which one is able to 'grasp' a rule, and what it means to follow the rule. To be in accord with the practice, means to be in accord with "the common behaviour of mankind." (*PI*, 206) Thus, rule following is inextricably tied to external phenomena, and cannot be fully explained by reference to the 'mental'. This issue aside, Searle is at odds with Wittgenstein insofar as Searle's understanding of the regress argument undermines his supposed connection with Wittgenstein's understanding of obeying a rule, and what it means to 'grasp' a rule. What this all comes down to is a difference in their understanding of intentionality. Wittgenstein sees the existence of a form of intentionality that does not involve representation, where Searle sees representation as synonymous with intentionality, and thus characteristic of all intentionality. Thus, the regress forces Searle to look elsewhere for an explanation of intentionality, and it is the non-intentional he settles on.

Searle's deference to the regress argument often comes through in his considerations that convince him of the need for his Background. One of these considerations of course is Searle's first case for the Background—our understanding of the literal meaning of sentences. As Searle explains, not everything it takes for us to understand the literal meaning of a sentence can itself be made part of that literal meaning, so something more than that literal meaning must be appealed to in accounting for our understanding of sentences. The conclusion of the Background seems to be undeniable, but what makes it so is the threat of a regress. If we were to try to state all the facts we think would suffice to 'fix' the meaning of a given sentence, Searle says:

[t]hose facts will be stated in a set of sentences, each with its own semantic content. But now those sentences themselves have to be understood and that understanding will require yet more Background. If we try to spell out the Background as part of the semantic content, we would never know when to stop, and each semantic content we produce will require yet more Background for its comprehension (*Intentionality*, p.148)

As Stroud recognizes, Searle's general theoretical project is at least clear about what he is not trying to do. That is, he does not want to say that the Background explains intentional phenomena in the way rules or 'representations' were said to do by the theories he rejects. (*Searle and his Critics*, p.249) However, Stroud says that the "threat of a regress undermines the idea that, in general, our mental activities are in the relevant [representational] sense guided by anything at all." (Ibid., p.249) Like Wittgenstein, Stroud thinks that rule following behaviour need not involve interpretation or require guidance from further interpretation to guarantee it being in accordance with the rule, and as such 'intentional'.

While trying to understand the general explanatory role Searle's Background could fill, Stroud makes mention of the 'conflict' one finds in Searle's account, and how the role the Background is supposed to play can only be ascribed on shaky grounds.

Stroud writes:

He [Searle] admits that 'there is a real difficulty in finding ordinary language terms to describe the Background' (*Intentionality*, p.156), but there seems to be no technical term that can be coherently introduced to describe it either. 'Practices', 'capacities' and 'habits' are not right, because they must somehow be understood as 'explicitly mental' phenomena. 'Assumptions', or 'presuppositions' are not right, because they imply that there are propositional contents which we entertain in some psychological mode. What is in the 'Background' must be thought of only as 'preintentional' or 'nonrepresentational'—in other words, as 'assumptions' or 'presuppositions' that are not really assumptions or presuppositions at all. (*Searle and his Critics*, p251)

Thus Searle explicitly and fully admits to his conflictedness, and this should be enough to cause suspicion of his own sense of where he is going with this. Nevertheless, in chapter five of *Intentionality*, Searle carries on, or flounders on, seemingly unconcerned with his general ambivalence towards his Background theory. Searle, as Stroud notes, should not be so blasé about the problem of being ill-equipped to describe the Background.

Regarding this problem, and Searle's attitude towards it, Stroud says:

[H]e seems to underestimate it. He says the price of trying to describe the 'Background' is 'metaphor, oxymoron, and outright neologism' (*Intentionality*, p.157). But to me it does not look like a question of linguistic nicety or insufficient vocabulary; it looks more like contradiction. What are found to be the best terms to describe the 'Background' must immediately be qualified in ways that contradict their literal application. Terms like 'assumption' and 'presupposition,' for example 'must be literally wrong' (*Ibid.*, p.136), although they otherwise seem to do exactly what reference to the elements of the 'Background' is supposed to do." (*Searle and his Critics*, p.252)

Thus Searle, with his regular restatement and qualification of the terms he uses to describe the Background, seems to consistently undermine what he wants to say about it, at the same time undermining what one naturally finds sensible and understandable within his theory. Stroud says,

What needs to be explained is why intentionalistic vocabulary is declared unavailable to us. Why would its use be a 'lapse?' It seems to be the most natural vocabulary for describing the phenomenon in question. Searle agrees that when he lifts his mug of beer in a restaurant and is surprised by its near weightlessness, 'we would naturally say I *believed* that the mug was made of glass, and I *expected* it to be heavy' (*Intentionality*, p.157). But he thinks that what we say is literally wrong. He does not say why. He declares rather that 'he simply acted,' but that does not seem to preclude an intentional description's being true of him. It is not wrong to say he was surprised; why doesn't the surprise betoken an expectation or other similar attitude? That seems to be the only way to make sense of it. (*Searle and his Critics*, p.252)

Searle's claims about what one can rightly say about the elements of the Background go against our natural understanding of the role a Background would fill in one's intentional life.

If anything, as Stroud puts it, the Background must make 'intelligible' to us how we come to be in any of the intentional states we are in. However, as Stroud notes, Searle adds the seemingly superfluous provision that "it must do so in 'mental' terms." (*Searle and his Critics*, p.253) But, to pose this demand in this way shows the inner conflict of such an aspiration:

Our abilities and capacities in themselves explain nothing; they are necessary, but their presence does not explain any particular exercise of them...and no brute non-mental or non-intentional phenomenon could be part of the 'Background' either, since they could never explain our being in the intentional states we are in. (*Searle and his Critics*, p.253)

Consequently, a conflict exists in the demand for any explanation of intentionality that supersedes intentionalistic vocabulary. It seems that the only way we can understand things is through intentionalistic language, and even to aspire to go beyond this is, in a relevant sense, unintelligible. Thus, it seems that Searle's proposed direction, his proposed type of theory, fails to find sense. If not completely unintelligible, it at least lacks clarity. Stroud explains:

...on the one hand we 'lapse' into intentionalistic vocabulary because we are looking for an explanation that will make the phenomenon intelligible to us *in the right way*; but since the 'Background' is also something that is supposed to explain how any intentional states are possible, we see that it cannot be made up of intentional states in turn. There is therefore no vocabulary left for describing it at all. (*Searle and his Critics*, p.253, my italics)

The 'right' kind of explanation, as Stroud puts it, is not there for Searle because of the conflictedness his entire project embodies. It makes the reader wonder why Searle

demands a completely non-intentional explanation of intentionality in the first place.

Searle gives not a moment's thought to the possibility that intentionality might be irreducible. In Stroud's diagnosis, the conflicted nature of Searle's theory is now in full view.

No explanation in non-intentional terms could make intentional phenomenon intelligible in the right way; no explanation in intentional terms could explain intentional states in general. The quest for a general theory of intentionality along these lines would seem to involve demands that cannot be met. (*Searle and his Critics*, p.253)

There seems to be no way we can intelligibly talk, or theorize about the Background, but this is only so if we think that the intentional must be explained in terms of the non-intentional, which Searle obviously does.

If, perhaps, one thinks of intentionality as being irreducible and something that can only be predicated of human beings, and not brains, and that capacities and abilities are had by people and are not purely the matter of causal neurophysiological structures, then there is no problem talking about the reasons why people do the things they do and how they are capable of doing the things they do. This seems like the only available point of view, and way we can talk about these 'capacities' and 'abilities'. The threat of a regress, Stroud says, does not, by itself, eliminate this direction in discourse.

The threat of a regress is not of course inconsistent with explaining any particular intentional phenomena or set of such phenomena in intentional terms. The mug lifter was surprised and what partly explains his being in that state is that he was expecting the mug to be heavier. That helps *make sense* of his present condition in a way *no purely non-intentional cause could do*. (*Searle and his Critics*, p.257, my italics)

Stroud hammers the point home and, based on perhaps a Humean intuition, he draws a distinction between what, as it were, makes sense and that which is purely non-

intentional and causal—between what is intentional and what is external, casual, and analogous to a billiard ball model. Thus, the crux of Stroud’s diagnosis of Searle’s project shows itself. The Background should make intentionality intelligible, and rational, and these are normative notions. The normative requires more than a causal explanation. Searle’s physicalist understanding of ‘mental’ and his insistence on the eventual reduction to solely ‘mental’ explanation creates a schizoid mandate for the Background, and this is the root of Searle’s conflicted account of it.

Stroud, opposed to Searle’s conflicted mandate, offers another way, perhaps the only way, one can make sense ‘in intelligible ways’ in an explanation of intentionality. Not surprisingly, his proposed explanation neither points to, nor requires an appeal to non-intentional or non-normative aspects. It seems that such an appeal would not make sense to us in any meaningful way. If we understand ‘intelligible’ to mean ‘normative’, Stroud’s proposed view does not leave the domain of the intentional in describing ourselves and the reasons why we are in the intentional states we are in:

This picture of understanding intentional states and other intentional phenomena does not require a ‘Background’ in Searle’s sense. What is appealed to to explain intentional phenomena are other intentional phenomena, not ‘pre-intentional’ or ‘non-representational’ assumptions, presuppositions, stances, or attitudes. (*Searle and his Critics*, p257)

Thus, Searle’s theory of the Background is a result of the understandable desire to fully explain how it is we come to have intentional states. In Stroud’s words, “[s]ince it is a fact of the world that there are beings that are in intentional states, we feel that there must be some explanation of that general fact.” (*Searle and his Critics*, p.258) However, with Searle’s disqualification of particular intentional states as being useful to explain them, the Background, as Searle insists, must be ‘pre’ or ‘non’ intentional. But, as Stroud puts

it, “no non-intentional phenomena could explain them *in the right way*.”(my italics) This ‘right way’ means it must appeal to our sense of the normative, the rational, and the reasonable. To do this, insofar as the Background can be an explanation of intentional states, it must appeal to our intentional states, or sense of the normative, otherwise it lacks this intelligibility.

Searle’s reply to Stroud’s criticisms does little to remedy the problems he points out. Searle says that he “does not postulate the existence of the Background out of some theoretical need, but claims its existence as a matter of fact.” (*Searle and his Critics*, p. 290) This is obviously disingenuous with respect to the original rationale of the Background (i.e. the regress argument). He adds that if you follow out the threads in the Network of intentional states you will discover that the whole system of intentionality ‘only works against’ the set of capacities, abilities, etc., that are not themselves intentional. However, what other sense of ‘working against’, do we have here other than ‘making intelligible’? Searle offers the Background, but being non-intentional, it lacks the explanatory power that could give some sense of ‘working against’ that we could understand. Any case of ‘working against’ can only be deemed so normatively, because working against, in the sense that it ‘fixes’ literal meaning, or intentional states, can only ‘work’ or have success if they can in turn be determined ‘successful’. This can only be done with reference to what is normally the case, as well as what is acceptable in conversation and discourse. Later, in *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Searle will subsequently replace ‘works against’ with the less intentionally loaded ‘relative to’—but to no avail.

4.4 Chapter Eight of *The Rediscovery of the Mind*: “Consciousness, Intentionality, and the Background”

One year after the publication of his exchange with Stroud, Searle publishes his book *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992). In chapter eight of the book, Searle offers a supposedly overhauled and refined version of the Background that, he says, has “developed in some important respects” since he wrote *Intentionality*. (p.175) However, this claim proves to be superficial, inasmuch as his conflictedness continues, and seems to compound, despite or because of the fact that he seems to be more aware of it, and despite his attempts to justify it or explain it away.

Searle begins the chapter “Consciousness, Intentionality, and the Background” with the broadly Wittgensteinian notion that, like rules, intentional states are not self-interpreting or self-applying, and they are in need of a something else in order to find application. He offers five theses which once characterized his initial view of the Background:

1. Intentional states do not function autonomously. They do not determine conditions of satisfaction in isolation.
2. Each intentional state requires for its functioning a Network of other intentional states. Conditions of satisfaction are determined only *relative to* the Network.
3. Even the Network is not enough. The Network only functions *relative to* a set of Background capacities.
4. These capacities are not and cannot be treated as more intentional states or part of the content of any particular intentional state.
5. The same intentional content can determine different conditions of satisfaction (such as truth conditions) *relative to* different Backgrounds, and *relative to* some Backgrounds it determines none at all. (p.177, my italics)

One notices right away that Searle uses the expression 'relative to'. Its common meaning is 'dependent on' or 'connected with', but Searle does not elaborate fully what sense of the expression he is using, or its particular nature, and so its use is uncertain. What type of dependence or interconnectedness does he mean? It seems that Searle's use of 'relative' implies a normative dependence or connectedness, but Searle wants 'relative' to be understood causally; that is, he wants us to say that the Background causes the Network, and the intentional states therein, to function. However, it can be shown that Searle's explanation of the nature of the Background conflicts with the role it is supposed to play. The rest of the chapter promises some important revisions that address certain significant difficulties.

He continues the chapter with many of the same arguments found in *Intentionality*, and starts it all off in much the same way he did before by focusing on literal meaning as his first case. As in the earlier writings his conflictedness seems rooted in the fudging of the original rationale of the word 'against' in order to explain the relationship between Intentionality, intentional states, and the Background, and, in this regard, Searle offers much the same as before. As an explanation of how the literal meaning of the word 'cut' can be construed differently in different sentences, Searle says:

[E]ach sentence is interpreted *against* a Background of human capacities (abilities to engage in certain practices, know-how, ways of doing things, etc.), and those capacities will *fix* different interpretations, even though the literal meaning of the expression remains constant. (p.179, my italics)

The uses of both 'against' and 'fix' here are systematically ambiguous. On the one hand, they are being used to refer to the functioning of human understanding, of intelligibility, and, as such, they are normative notions. On the other hand, the Background is construed

as a collection of purely neurophysiological, non-intentional capacities, and, as such, their contribution can only be causal. As it stands, both meanings cannot coexist harmoniously, and it is in this major way one finds Searle's use of systematically ambiguous language problematic.

Much like his systematically ambiguous use of 'enable', Searle's use of 'against' comes to distort its common normative meaning by construing its meaning to be causal. However, this misconstrues the primarily normative role the Background plays in intelligibility. One might suppose that Searle's neurophysiologicalism is to blame, and that his tendency to reduce all intentionality to brain states is what is at the root of his conflictedness. However, it seems that his neurophysiologicalism could really be in turn a symptom of a greater problem, which is his pursuit of a non-intentional account of intentionality.

Searle's intention, now, is to completely blur the normative notions with causal notions in his new account of the relationship between the Network and the Background. Where once the relationship was that the Network 'shaded off' into the Background (see *Intentionality*, p. 151), the difference between the two now seems moot, because now his intention is to make their natures the same, but different. The Network, he claims, was once thought of an inventory of intentional states. Searle finds something wrong with this, which is true, but he does not see the real reason why. He offers specific revisions: "The thesis of the Background [-cum-Network] has to be rewritten to get rid of the presupposition of the mind as a collection, an inventory, of mental phenomena, because the only occurrent reality of the mental as mental is consciousness." (p.187) Leaving aside issues surrounding consciousness, this new offering or direction proves to be

problematic. Searle has maintained thus far that the Background is wholly non-intentional. However, this new account of the relationship between the Network and the Background has the goal to further dilute the claim by letting intentional aspects seep completely into the Background:

On the view of the mind as containing an inventory of mental states, there must be a category mistake in trying to draw a line between the Network and the Background, because Background consists of a set of capacities, and the Network is not a matter of capacities at all, but of intentional states...I now think the real mistake was to suppose that there is an inventory of mental states, some conscious, some unconscious...the thesis of the Background has to be rewritten to get rid of the presupposition of the mind as a collection, an inventory, of mental phenomena, because the only occurrent reality of the mental as mental is consciousness (p.187)

This new direction that Searle introduces intentionally blurs any significant distinction between the Network and the Background. Their relationship, once defined as the relationship between the intentional Network and the non-intentional Background, has now been washed out and they now become the same thing. Searle attempts to shed some light on this new, utterly conflicted, view:

What goes on in the brain, other than consciousness, has an occurrent reality that is neurophysiological rather than psychological. When we speak of unconscious states, we are speaking of the capacities of the brain to generate consciousness. Furthermore, some capacities of the brain do not generate consciousness, but rather function to fix the application of the conscious states. They enable me to walk, run, speak, etc. (p.188)

Thus, those once unconscious intentional states of the Network become 'capacities of the brain to generate consciousness', which are neurophysiological states. Now, the Network, once comprising intentional states, is fully construed as just as non-intentional as the Background.

What could Searle possibly mean now by ‘function to fix’? Fixing is a normative notion. It is rich with contentful, rational, intentional overtones, and it cannot be fully understood causally or neurophysiologically; we are now at a loss to determine, or answer, normatively how the fixing works, even though the way Searle uses the term begs that question. ‘Fixing’ cannot be a causal phenomenon. ‘Fixing’ is normative, an achievement word, a success word. An *application* is fixed (i.e. brought into existence) as a normative phenomenon. It seems now that Searle has thrown away the distinction between the non-intentional and the intentional. This is in obvious conflict with what has been said up to now about the Background.

The conflict within Searle’s revised version of the Background is most apparent in the next two paragraphs. In an apparent moment of clarity, Searle begins the first paragraph with some recognition that now his initial distinctions are in trouble:

Given this picture, how do we account for all those intuitions that led us to the original thesis of the Background and to the distinction between Background and Network? According to the account I gave in the last chapter, when we describe a man as having an unconscious belief, we are describing an occurrent neurophysiology in terms of its dispositional capacity to cause conscious thoughts and behaviour. But if that is right, then it seems to follow that the Network of unconscious intentionality is part of the Background. The occurrent ontology of those parts of the Network that are unconscious is that of a neurophysiological capacity, but the Background consists entirely of such capacities. (p.188)

But how can the Network, once construed as containing a set of unconscious beliefs, now be construed as a capacity? The overt intentional aspects of the Network cannot just go away. Yet, Searle tucks the intentional Network inside the non-intentional Background, as though it belonged there. What Searle is following here is a scorched earth de-intentionalizing. Searle asks, as a question for research, “which of the brain’s capacities

should be thought of as Background capacities?”(p.189) and he is unfazed by the implication that his new revisions have succeeded in making that question more and more unanswerable, because Background capacities neurophysiologically construed cannot be the same sort of thing as the content-laden, purpose-soaked capacities of an animal or a human. Likewise, one cannot properly characterize the capacities of the brain by saying ‘the brain has many talents’.⁷⁵

Searle tries to gloss over these issues in the next paragraph:

So far so good. The question of how to distinguish between Network and Background disappears, because the Network is part of the Background that we describe in terms of its capacity to cause conscious intentionality. But we are still not out of the morass, because we are left with the question, What is to become of the claim that intentionality functions against a set of nonintentional capacities? Why is the capacity to generate the belief that Bush is president to be treated any differently from the capacity to generate the belief that objects are solid, for example? And are we to make the distinction between the functioning of unconscious intentionality and nonintentional capacities? It seems we have traded the problem of distinguishing between Network and Background for the problem of distinguishing the intentional from the non-intentional within Background capacities. (p.188)

If at this point we are not out of the ‘morass’ then so far is not so good. His intentional/non-intentional distinction is now most certainly in trouble. Although Searle seems to be seeing more of the flaws of his argument, he does not address them fully, but opts for restatement, and thus complicates his own account of the Background.

The idea that the Background can successfully be rehashed ‘in terms of its capacity to cause consciousness’, or the thought that ‘intentionality functions against a set

⁷⁵ To add to the muddle, Searle’s account of ‘capacity’ runs together both the notions of occurrent and the dispositional, which traditionally are distinguished. Philosophers, such as Gilbert Ryle have noted that capacities are not occurrent. They are not events, or something that can take place. It seems strange for one to say, for instance, ‘Sarah’s capacity to run occurred on Friday, at noon’, unless to say it jokingly. See Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

of non-intentional capacities' are not intelligible. As a result, normative and causal aspects are run together to suit Searle and his theoretical needs. He opts, yet again, to restate the hypothesis of the Background:

All conscious intentionality—all thought, perception, understanding, etc.—determines conditions of satisfaction only relative to a set of capacities that are not and could not be part of that very conscious state. The actual content by itself is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction (p.189)

Yet again, 'against' is replaced with 'only relative to', leaving the normative/causal distinction smudged. There is no way Searle can adequately explain 'only relative to' causally; 'relative to' must here be a normative notion, and it cannot cease to be normative and still be something intentional states are, in the relevant sense, 'relative to'.

Searle moves on to revise his first five theses. Conveniently he eliminates the original number four, leaving the rest, although in a slightly different form. Number four, as we recall, stated: These capacities are not and cannot be treated as more intentional states or as part of the content of any particular intentional states. (p.177) By eliminating this proviso, the original stipulation that the Background must not be intentional, based on the threat of a regress, is now relaxed to make way for intentionality to enter into the Background. Searle does not attempt to address his seemingly conflicted view, and, on the contrary, endorses it. Later on, the claim of thesis number four resurfaces, but is promptly contradicted, and so Searle's conflictedness is solidified within his theory.

Nearing the end of the chapter, Searle states five alleged laws that are 'certain of the operation of the Background', and some of these laws reveal Searle's conflicted standpoint. In law number two, Searle states that "Intentionality occurs in a coordinated flow of action and perception, and the Background is *the condition of the possibility of*

the forms of the flow.”(p.195, my italics) Why doesn't Searle just say condition of the flow? It seems that Searle wants to tie together the philosophically uninteresting thought that, of course, we need a brain to have intentionality with the thought that we need implicit normative notions as well. Although, Searle has seemingly disqualified the normative, as intentional, from being a part of the Background, he sneaks the intentional back in a few sentences later when he says:

Think of any normal slice of your waking life: You are eating a meal, taking a walk in the park, writing a letter, making love, or driving to work. In each case the condition of the possibility of the performance is an underlying Background competence. The Background not only *shapes the application* of the intentional content—*what counts as* ‘driving to work,’ for example; but the existence of the intentional content in the first place *requires* the Background abilities—without a terrific apparatus *you can't even have* the intentionality involved in ‘driving to work’, for example. (p.195, my italics)

Most, if not all of these highlighted notions have normative implications. They have a sense that involves contentful, external, social aspects, not causal or ‘non-intentional’ aspects. In the sense provided by this passage, the Background competencies involve one’s ability to understand externally determined things, and this can’t be construed in terms of a capacity to cause anything, because a ‘capacity’ itself has and is determined by normative aspects.

The fourth and the fifth laws show us Searle’s most blatant flirtation with contradiction. Law four begins “Though intentionality rises to the level of the Background ability, it reaches all the way down to the bottom of the ability.”(p.195) Then, in his explication of the fifth and final law, Searle opens with , “Though the Background is not itself intentional...”(p.196) With what is now characteristic ambivalence, Searle brings intentional states into the Background, but at the same time

maintains that the Background is not intrinsically intentional. He elaborates further on this fifth and final law: “The Background does not name a sequence of events that simply occur; rather the Background consists of mental capacities, dispositions, stances, ways of behaving, know how, savoir faire, etc.” (p.196) At this stage, one might ask What happened to the brain? It seems it has been left out of Searle’s final construal of the Background in *The Rediscovery of the Mind*.

4.5 Searle and Wittgenstein revisited

As we have already discussed, when explaining his view of the Background, Searle often cites Wittgenstein as a major influence, and has said that later Wittgenstein’s philosophy is in large part about the Background⁷⁶ A case can be made that supports this claim, but it inevitably wobbles. This is because although Searle’s account is broadly Wittgensteinian in the way he understands that meanings or intentional states can be ‘fixed’ only ‘against’ some sort of ‘background’, it is clear that Wittgenstein and Searle do not agree on the nature of the background and its fixative powers.

Wittgenstein says that there is a way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation. For Searle, this would mean that if it is not a form of interpretation, then it cannot be intentional either. In this way Wittgenstein and Searle conflict, because although Wittgenstein’s analogues of the Background may do away with the representational (in the form of ‘interpretation’), they do not abandon all aspects of intentionality. Searle’s Background, unlike those analogues of Wittgenstein’s, is conflicted because, though it starts out encompassing broadly Wittgensteinian notions, it

⁷⁶ Searle, J. *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), p.177.

then tries to de-intentionalize the Background. However, the non-intentional cannot fill the role of explaining, or making intelligible, how it is that we have the intentional states we have when that ‘how’ is to be unpacked by way of the normative relation signified by ‘against which’. In attempting to de-intentionalize the Background—an attempt which in a broadly Wittgensteinian view must fail—Searle is not entitled to his claims that his view is in line with those of Wittgenstein’s.

As stated before, it can be said that Wittgenstein introduces at least two, if not three, cognate notions of a Background. These notions are that of, ‘form of life’, ‘the natural history of human beings’ and ‘general facts of nature’. The first notion ‘form of life’⁷⁷ can be roughly compared to Searle’s understanding of ‘local Background’. The features of a form of life, and local Background, include what is implicit to local cultural practices that allow the involvement in the subtleties of language-games. The second notion of ‘the natural history of human being’ can be likened to Searle’s understanding of ‘deep Background’, or, in other words, things common to all human beings, including walking, drinking, eating, playing.⁷⁸

These notions, however, escape remark in Searle’s account of the Background. What now becomes interesting is Wittgenstein’s statement at *Philosophical Investigations* 129, where he touches on the philosopher’s ability to recognize Background-like phenomena. He states:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his

⁷⁷ See Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), passages 19, 23, and 241. As well, see pp. 174, 226.

⁷⁸ Compare Searle’s *Intentionality* (1983), pp. 143, 144 with Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), passages 25 and 415.

enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at one time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.

Though Searle is struck by the power of the Background—its significance and indispensability for all things intentional—this power is not that of a *causal sine-qua-non*. On the contrary, it is a normative, contentful, and teleological, although implicit, hidden, and mostly out of view. Wittgenstein’s analogues, like the analogy of the river bed, ‘hinge propositions’, ‘forms of life’, etc. give us a way of talking about the Background that is rich with intentional things, although these things may lack representational aspects. What is importantly un-Searlean here is that there is no mention of neurophysiological causes to account for these things, all the more so with ‘general facts of nature’.⁷⁹

While broadly Wittgensteinian in its original rationale, now coupled with his apparent allowing in of more intentional aspects rather than non-intentional aspects, Searle seems to make some progress towards the light provided by Wittgenstein. However, as it stands, Searle’s presentation of the Background is conflicted. The original rationale is given in terms of intentional states being possible, conceivable, and intelligible, only ‘against’ the Background. As such, ‘being against’ cannot be a causal relation. To ‘enable’, as the Background is said to do, cannot be a causal enabling. In demanding that the Background’s normative achievement be construed as a causal sequence, Searle demands the impossible, the incoherent. It is no surprise that he still hasn’t found what he’s looking for.

⁷⁹ See *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), passage 142.

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