John Searle’s undoubtedly great contribution to the study of human mind, language, action and society has involved the notion of normativity in some central, though not always obvious and explicit, way. Despite the great service done by the notion in its various forms in Searle’s often illuminating accounts of those complicated and entangled phenomena, he seems to fail to appreciate the importance of exploring a possible crucial link between some deep, yet naturalized form of normativity, and the emergence of 

bona fide (i.e., human) intentionality, with all its teleological consequences or repercussions, in the natural evolutionary process. As this seems to be too large an issue to be handled properly in a paper like the present one, I shall limit my discussion to one salient topic in Searle’s theory, i.e., ‘unconscious intentionality’, and also put it in some comparative light from a broad Chinese perspective. Perhaps as a byproduct, my appraisal of Searle’s relevant views might also serve to show both the virtues and limitations of certain core ideas in traditional Chinese philosophy.

The phenomena of unconscious intentionality can be easily illustrated by a typical example Searle gives. I believe that G.W. Bush is the US president even when I am sound asleep. Why can I legitimately claim that I have such an unconscious belief as opposed to saying that I wouldn’t have any beliefs whatsoever if I lost consciousness at any moment? If we take beliefs or other mental states as occurrent brain states with appropriate intentional contents, then the answer to the above question must lie in an account of the function of those nonconscious
brain states involved at the particular time to the effect that it has the intentional content in question (i.e., “G.W. Bush is the US president”). Searle has a brief answer here: “an unconscious state is mental only in virtue of its capacity in principle to produce a conscious mental state.”

Talk about ‘capacity in principle’ has the advantage of avoiding the hard job of testing whether any occurrent brain state is in fact in a position to cause the conscious state with that particular content. The question is, nevertheless, should we ascribe a particular intentional or propositional content to such an unconscious state?

It seems obvious, or it may well be argued that when I ascribe a simple, common-sense belief to someone (including myself), whether the person is awake or asleep, the certainty of the ascription does not (need to) rely on any particular knowledge of his (or my) occurrent state of the brain, but rather on some holistic feature of the mind/brain as a system with its general adaptive capacity within the social and natural environment. If I have no doubt that I now believe that G.W. Bush is the US president, I can reasonably assume that, without relevant information change, I will continue to hold the belief even when my mind is preoccupied or overwhelmed by mental states whose contents have nothing to do with that Bush belief, including when I am having a dreamless sleep. The reason why I can make this assumption has a lot to do with my confidence or knowledge of the fact that my brain will continue to function normally with its memory as well as the capacity to retrieve and organize relevant information in response to certain contingent circumstances, either external or internal (i.e., inside the body), arising from time to time. In other words, my ability to have access to well-formed beliefs or their neurobiological equivalents will remain stable no matter whether I am in fact having access to them at the moment. This seems to be all the insight underlying Searle’s statement above, and with that I certainly do not disagree. But there is a further point that should not be ignored. That is, belief is taken here as some occurrent, functional mental state as opposed to a merely stable disposition or capacity of some sort belonging only to holistic (and dynamic) structure of the brain as a system. Searle seems to conflate, or equivocate between, the two meanings. On the one hand, when he talks about a causal reduction of token mental states to token neurobio-

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