John Searle’s 50 Years at Berkeley—A Celebration
Mon Feb 23, 2009
The Maude Fife Room (315 Wheeler Hall) — 2:10 pm

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It is really a special pleasure to return to this place where I learned so much to pay tribute to my dissertation advisor. I doubt I’m going to be able to capture in words how important he has been for me, and I’m sure what I’m about to say will fail to express how grateful I am to him, but it will still give me unique satisfaction to try.

I arrived at Berkeley in 1995 with vague ideas about writing a dissertation in philosophy of mathematics or logic. That lasted about two weeks into the first-year graduate student seminar, which was on philosophy of language that year, and which to my great good fortune was led by John Searle. Listening to Searle talk about Frege and Russell and the rest of 20th century philosophy of language remains the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me in the classroom. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that everything I have done in philosophy since can be traced back in one way or another to what happened in that first-year seminar.

I ended up writing a dissertation in philosophy of language, and of course John Searle was my advisor. A guiding idea of my dissertation, which continues to be central for me and which I owe entirely to Searle, is the idea that the speech act is the fundamental unit of analysis in philosophy of language. Meaning, truth, reference, satisfaction—all of it arises out of what we do when we make assertions and ask questions and give orders, and so explanations in philosophy of language should start with the speech act. That Searlian idea deeply pervades everything in my work.

But Searle’s importance for me has not just been theoretical. Professionally, he’s been as good an advisor as one could hope for. I’m quite sure I wouldn’t have the job I have now at the University of Minnesota if it weren’t for his effort on my behalf, and I’ll never forget the bottle of champagne he opened when I got the job offer. His greatest influence of all, though, has been personal. One spring he urged me to go to Seattle for an APA conference—one of his research assistants was going, and he wanted me to introduce her to people and show her around. That research assistant and I are now married and we had our first child in September.

In my remarks today I thought I’d talk about two of the most important lessons I learned from Searle. I chose these particular lessons not just because they have been so valuable to me, but I think they reveal something about Searle himself.

The first is the secret to writing clearly. John Searle is without a doubt one of the clearest writers ever to work in philosophy. His work sets a standard of clarity that we’re all trying to live up to, although to be honest, it’s probably a good thing that not every philosopher succeeds. Imagine if Aristotle or Kant or Wittgenstein wrote as clearly as Searle. Our students wouldn’t need us anymore—we’d all be unemployed.
His clarity is of course one source of his great philosophical power. One of the reasons Searle blows so many other philosophers out of the water is that he is so much clearer than everyone else. It’s impossible to hide from him. He has an incredible ability to cut through all the technical details and expose the philosophical essence of whatever position he’s presently demolishing. One of my favorite examples of this is Searle’s response to formal decision theory. Here’s Searle, in his book *Rationality in Action*:

> When I first learned about mathematical decision theory as an undergraduate at Oxford, it seemed to me there was an obvious problem with it: it seems to be a strict consequence of the axioms that if I value my life and I value twenty-five cents … there must be some odds at which I would bet my life against a quarter. I thought about it, and I concluded there are no odds at which I would bet my life against a quarter, and if there were, I would not bet my son’s life against a quarter. So, over the years, I argued about this with several famous decision theorists … and usually, after about half an hour of discussion, they came to the conclusion: “You are just plain irrational.” Well, I am not so sure. (p.6)

It’s almost enough to make one feel sorry for those famous decision theorists.

So what’s the secret to writing clearly? Examples. This is something Searle used to say to me over and over again. “Examples,” he’d say. “Examples, examples, examples. You need more examples. You’re not being clear until you’ve given some examples.” He’s absolutely right about this. Clear writing in philosophy, and anything else, begins and ends with examples.

As I’m sure you all know, Searle is a master of the philosophical example. We owe to him one of the great examples of 20th century philosophy — I mean of course the Chinese Room. But my favorite example of Searle’s examples is about something else. It comes in the context of an argument for something he calls the Background. Here’s the idea of the Background, stated in the abstract and with fully generality:

> The literal meaning of a sentence determines truth or satisfaction conditions only relative to a background of non-intentional abilities, assumptions, habits and expectations.

Now, that sounds pretty good, but it doesn’t really mean anything until you look at some examples. This is one of my favorites – here’s Searle:

> Suppose I go into a restaurant determined to say exactly and literally what I mean, that is determined to utter imperative sentences that give exact expression to my desires. I start by saying: “Give me a hamburger, medium rare, with ketchup and mustard, but easy on the relish.” …
Suppose for example that the hamburger is brought to me encased in a cubic yard of Lucite plastic so rigid that it takes a jackhammer to bust it open, or suppose the hamburger is a mile wide and is “delivered” to me by smashing down the wall of the restaurant and sliding the edge of it in. Has my order … been fulfilled or obeyed in these cases? (p.127, Expression and Meaning)

It obviously hasn’t been obeyed. So there must be unspoken assumptions or expectations about how hamburger orders are filled that combine with the literal meaning of the sentence to rule these cases out. Searle’s example makes this beautifully, powerfully clear.

The importance of examples is a lesson I try to pass on to my students. I tell graduate students that a trick to finding the weakness in a philosophy paper is to find the place where the author fails to give an example. The trick can also be applied profitably to oneself. I always know that I’ve come to a dead-end whenever I can’t think of a good example to illustrate some claim I’ve made. That’s when I know I need to start over.

I think one of the reasons this works is that examples force you to be honest with yourself. A good example draws out intuitions that simply can’t be ignored or papered over. One of the things I’m really grateful for is that Searle taught me how to be honest with myself when I’m doing philosophy. And he taught me this through his insistence on examples. So there’s a lot there in this one lesson: clarity, power, honesty – it’s all in the examples.

The second lesson is something Searle used to say to me at the end of the audiotapes I’d get from him with comments on chapters of my dissertation. I would give him a piece of writing and a week or so later he’d return it along with an audiotape of his comments. It was a good system. He could say a lot more on the tape then what he could write down in the margins. At the end of every tape, after dismantling whatever poorly conceived idea I’d come up with that week, Searle would always say the same thing: “Now Peter, the most important thing is, keep going. Keep going. Allright, that’s it.” Click – and then the tape would stop.

I’ve thought a lot about what he meant by those words – “keep going”. One thing he clearly meant was that I should continue to work hard. I’m not sure everyone realizes just how hard Searle works. His output is just amazing. I can count 11 books he’s published since I met him in 1995, and I may have missed some – and these are just the books. During the time I was at Berkeley he could pretty much always be counted on to be in his office, pacing the floor, writing, dictating, editing, proofreading, corresponding, talking to students and colleagues all over the world, that is, if he wasn’t in the classroom giving a lecture or leading a seminar.

But it’s no great secret that you need to work hard to be successful. I think Searle meant more than that when he told me to keep going. Philosophy is a creative endeavor, and like anything creative, most of the time your ideas don’t go anywhere. If it were possible
to count ideas, I’d say you’d be doing pretty well if you have one good idea out of every hundred. And really good ideas, ones that truly advance our understanding of some philosophical problem – you’d be lucky to have one or two of these over the course of a whole career. So there is a lot of failure in philosophy, a lot of missteps and rejection. It’s easy to get discouraged, especially if you’re a graduate student who isn’t sure whether you’re cut out for a career in philosophy. The best way to survive, maybe the only way, is to put your head down and keep going. Shrug off the failures and try something else. And even when an idea does pan out, don’t get complacent. Keep pushing on to new problems and ideas and arguments. I don’t know whether sheer brilliance is a necessary condition for success in philosophy, but it’s definitely not a sufficient condition. Perseverance, though – without that, you won’t make it very far at all.

Even this, though, doesn’t quite capture everything in his message to me to keep going. Think about it: you can’t keep going without the confidence that there’s something out there worth saying, that there’s a good idea waiting for you just around the corner. So there was a note of optimism in his message. He was telling me: take heart! You’ll think of something good! I can’t tell you how valuable and meaningful it was for me to hear that from him. It gave me a reservoir of confidence that I’m still drawing on to this day. And it shows something about Searle’s own approach to philosophy. He really is an optimist when it comes to solving philosophical problems. He goes in with total and unwavering confidence that this problem is something we can solve, this is something we can figure out and get to the bottom of. That optimism comes through on every page, and even more so in person, and it’s exhilarating.

So that’s the second lesson – keep going. There are many, many more lessons I could talk about, and so many other intangible ways in which he’s influenced me — I could go on all day about it. Instead I’ll simply say thank you, Professor Searle, thank you so much, and congratulations on 50 years at Berkeley.