I met John Searle the year before he came to Berkeley. When I arrived in Oxford as a Fulbright scholar in the fall of 1958, fresh off the boat (and it was a boat in those days – the Queen Elizabeth in my case), my first encounter with Oxford philosophy was a talk given at one of the university’s discussion groups by Alison Knox, a graduate student in philosophy at the time. The talk was a response to John’s article, “Proper Names,” recently published in *Mind*, and John was the commentator. I don’t remember the content of the discussion, only that the room was packed, the atmosphere intense, and that it gave me the sense that I was at the center of the philosophical universe, which was probably true at the time.

John was then a Lecturer in philosophy at Christ Church, the vast, beautiful, and imposing college attached to the cathedral of Oxford. He had arrived at the University in 1952 as a Rhodes scholar, somehow without worrying to complete his undergraduate degree at Wisconsin – I have never known how he managed that. He stayed on as a graduate student after getting his B.A. at Oxford, and when I met him he was completing the doctorate and was in his third year as a Lecturer. I was never a student of John’s, but Oxford was teeming with philosophical activity, and I got to know him through encounters at talks and seminars. He was, as he has always been, superbly accessible and outgoing, and he immediately treated me for no good reason as an equal. He even invited me to dine at High Table in Christ Church, along with the canons of the Cathedral and assorted dons in various stages of decay. John wore a three-piece suit, and for the only time in my life I took snuff when it was passed around in the senior common room after dinner.
John seemed perfectly at home in this venerable establishment, defiantly unanglicized, with his pure Western twang and blunt style – unassimilated but unselfconscious. I have always thought of his failure to pick up the slightest trace of a British accent during his lengthy stay in Oxford as a phonetic expression of his strong individual character. He also seemed at home in Europe. His passport had had to be expanded with a large, accordionlike insert to accommodate all the customs stamps from his frequent trips to France. He even had a French car, one of those gorgeous old low-slung Citroens of prewar design, with big, swooping fenders and a running board – a car I suspect most of you have never seen, unless you are a fan of old Jean Gabin movies. Automobiles have always been profoundly important to John, and this gave him in advance a natural affinity for California.

John and Dagmar were already an item at that time. She was still Dagmar Carboch, and held a research position in Politics at Nuffield College, having reached Oxford from Czechoslovakia by way of Australia. They were a vivid and irresistible cosmopolitan couple, and were wonderfully hospitable and kind to me. Their capacity for friendship and generosity is an enduring quality, of which I have been the beneficiary for more than fifty years.

John was very attached to Oxford, which had formed him and which was then at its peak of philosophical strength and excitement. While I was there I was able to study with J. L. Austin, Paul Grice, Peter Strawson, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Isaiah Berlin, H. L. A. Hart, G. E. L. Owen, David Pears, James Thomson, Gilbert Ryle, and Bernard Williams. Austin was a commanding presence, dry, sarcastic, and devastating in public but remarkably kind to students one-on-one, in my experience. Austin was
visiting the Berkeley philosophy department during the fall of 1958, so I encountered him only when he returned in January 1959. John told me that Austin had been seriously tempted by an offer to move to Berkeley – “You could build an empire there,” John reported him as having said – but just at that point Austin became ill, and was diagnosed with cancer. He died in the spring of 1960, at the age of forty-eight.

In addition to being, along with Strawson, the most important early philosophical influence on John’s work, I assume that Austin had a hand in his going to Berkeley. Austin must have seen the natural fit and recommended John to the University, and the University to John. Initially one might think it impossible to imagine two people less alike – Austin the austere, schoolmasterly Englishman and John the hedonistic American extrovert -- but I think there was a natural sympathy between them. They shared a sense of comedy, and both were combative and competitive, but at the same time highly social, and committed to the advancement of the life of the mind through supportive institutions and collective effort.

They both thought of philosophy as a team sport, (with winners and losers, I might add). And they were both attracted to philosophical topics that emphasized the embeddedness of the individual in a structure of social interactions, rather than the relation of the solitary individual to the universe. The theory of speech acts, so important in the work of both Austin and Searle, is a prime example of this interest. John never took up the method of linguistic connoisseurship that was Austin’s trademark – for example the distinctions among shooting a donkey inadvertently, unintentionally, by accident, or by mistake. But John has always been drawn to empirical facts as a starting point for philosophical understanding, and the refusal to respect the boundary between
the empirical and the a priori was also an important disposition of Austin’s. Going through the Times Law Reports with Austin in his seminar on Excuses was a delicious treat. Austin was my thesis adviser at Oxford, and I assume that he had an even more memorable effect on John, who knew him better, than he had on me. The importance of Oxford in John’s formation cannot be exaggerated. He spent seven years there, and formed his philosophical style and some of his main interests during that period.

After John and Dagmar went off to Berkeley in 1959, I stayed in Oxford to finish the B.Phil., and then went to Harvard for the Ph.D. Barry Stroud and I overlapped as graduate students at Harvard in 1960-61, and then he too took a job at Berkeley. When I finished the degree in 1963, the job market was unbelievable. The post-war baby boom had reached college age, and state universities all over the country were expanding at warp speed. I went to Berkeley partly because John and Barry, two good friends, were there, and I suppose they had something to do with my being hired.

Berkeley was wonderful, in all the ways you are familiar with. John and Dagmar were thriving, and raising a family, and John was one of the most popular teachers in the university. When the student government course evaluations came out, I remember Tom Clarke saying that John’s evaluations read as though they had been written by his mother. This was the period when the Berkeley philosophy department moved decisively into the mainstream of analytic philosophy, and John’s presence was crucial. For some time Berkeley had had a stellar program in mathematical logic, but now the department began to reach out in other fields. This was part of a general tendency in the academic world away from institutional insularity and toward the creation of a dynamic international community.
And then there were all those students. In his book about the troubles of the sixties, *The Campus War*, John cites “sheer numbers” as one of the causes of campus unrest and the breakdown of authority. He is there referring to the huge enrollments at individual campuses. But I think the really important number was the size of the entire age cohort of students at that time, in this country and in other countries, which was quite out of proportion to the population of its elders. The baby boom generation, born in the years immediately after World War II, formed a society of its own, large enough and secure enough to set its own standards and not to feel that their lives depended on transforming themselves into grownups on the model of those who had left youth behind. The traditional source of adult authority – the desire of the young minority to be assimilated to the culture and norms of an adult world, was weakened by the sheer weight of numbers. That is why the baby boom generation has transformed American society so radically as it has passed like a huge lump through the national digestive tract.

Like John, I was here at the heady beginning of it all, in 1964, when the Free Speech Movement clashed with an administration that was under pressure from conservatives in state government and on the board of trustees. John, then still an assistant professor, was one of the first faculty members to side with the students. I remember him addressing a rally in Sproul Plaza, and noting that the faculty group invited by the administration to help solve the problem was limited to tenured faculty. “I like that touch,” said John. He eventually took an administrative post himself, and the conflict in Berkeley became more and more absorbing and destructive in succeeding years. By the time he published *The Campus War* in 1971 his mood was grim.
I had decamped in 1966, to Princeton. Partly it was the pull of New York, which I had always loved, but partly it was the sense that the sources of conflict at Berkeley were deep, and would make it a battleground indefinitely. I was spending too much time thinking about the latest disaster, or the next. But John stayed, and with his combative nature, he seems to have managed to stay sane while embroiled in these battles, on one side or the other. We were now friends at long distance, linked in the larger philosophical world through conferences and conventions, and even, more recently, by a common love for Paris, where we often find ourselves together in June, and where it is always a pleasure to take up again our extended pursuit of the higher gossip.

The creative work of an intellectual discipline like philosophy is done in private, by solitary individuals or small groups interacting at a high level. John has been a major internal contributor to the field in this way, and I won’t try to summarize his large theoretical achievements. But the place of the discipline in the wider world depends also on its having a public face, and the field of philosophy, and in particular analytic philosophy, is singularly fortunate that John Searle has been one of its most important representatives to the world at large in our time. This is due partly to his superb lucidity and force as a writer, comparable to that of Bertrand Russell in an earlier day. But it is due also to his powerful urge to engage with the significant intellectual forces, good and bad, in the civilization around him, to try to understand them, and to influence them by making available as widely as possible what can be learned from the insights and methods of contemporary philosophy.

There is a missionary element in John’s makeup, as there was in Russell’s. He is much more willing than most philosophers to expose himself to public conflict by
attacking what he sees as the forces of darkness. While this is an expression of his essential nature, it is not without cost. Unlike some prominent polemicists, he goes into battle again and again without the benefit of a thick skin. Even though he has a fundamentally sanguine temperament, John takes things hard, harder than most people I know, and I am all the more grateful to him for so often leading the charge against sophistry and illusion.

But John is much more than a dragon-slayer. His extensive writings, both academic and popular, have given countless people throughout the world their primary understanding of the central questions in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. He is one of the most famous and effective teachers of the subject in our time, and Berkeley is very lucky to be the place where for fifty years one has been able to encounter the man himself – an inimitable and unforgettable presence.

Thomas Nagel

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