

INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SEARLE (Berkeley University)*

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1. What kind of philosophical topics are you interested in? There is exactly one overriding question in philosophy today, indeed outside of the hard sciences it is the overriding question of contemporary intellectual life. It can be phrased in different forms, but the simplest way to put it is as follows: we now know a great deal about how the world works from physics, chemistry and biology. We know that the world consists entirely of the basic entities of physics, that these are organized into systems, and that on our little Earth, some of these systems have evolved from large, carbon based molecules into organisms such as plants and animals and ourselves. Now the question is, how do we accommodate a certain conception that we have of ourselves in what we know about the world anyway from physics, chemistry and biology? Specifically, how do we account for ourselves as conscious, intentional, mindful, free will having, rational, political, social, ethical, speech-act performing agents in a world that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, physical particles? Perhaps in the end we cannot make these two conceptions consistent. Perhaps some parts of our own self-conception we will have to give up as we find that we cannot make them consistent with the basic facts about how the world works.

Certain important intellectual developments have made this the central question in contemporary intellectual life. The first is that we now know so much that we can no longer take scepticism seriously as a threat to the growth of knowledge. It is important to emphasize that when Descartes and Bacon confronted the problem of scepticism in the seventeenth century, the possibility of universal, certain, objective knowledge was very much in doubt. Scepticism was more than just a philosophical puzzle, but was a genuine worry. Nowadays we can no longer have that worry in that form, simply because we know too much. Also, one of the great developments of twentieth century philosophy was the series of arguments presented by Austin, Wittgenstein and others that attempted to undermine the claim that scepticism was

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genuinely intelligible. I am not here attempting to adjudicate the question whether or not Austin and Wittgenstein succeeded in answering scepticism. The point I am making now is rather that we cannot take scepticism seriously in a way that the seventeenth century philosophers did.

A second development is that any kind of dualism is now out of the question. We no longer feel it necessary to postulate two different metaphysical realms, the realm of the mental and the realm of the physical; the realm of the human and the realm of the natural. Much less do we need to postulate three metaphysical realms: the physical, the mental and the cultural. On the contrary we now know that we live in exactly one world, and our task as philosophers is to give a coherent account of all the different aspects of that world.

In one way or another, nearly all of my work has been addressed to this question, though I did not see that this was the question that I was addressing until I had been answering specific subsidiary questions for a number of years. Specifically:

1. The philosophy of language as I practice it is essentially an attempt to answer the question, what is the relationship between sound and meaning? That is, we know that when I perform a speech act, a hole opens in my face and I emit an acoustic blast, a type of noise. We also know that the noise that comes out is meaningful, that it is one kind or another of a speech act and that it has such features as being true or false, relevant or irrelevant, well supported or not well supported. The problem for the philosophy of language is to explain how all of that is possible. What are the relationships between the physics and the semantics? I have discussed these and other questions in two books on the philosophy of language, *Speech Acts: an Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, and *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*.

2. The philosophy of mind and intentionality. Here the problem is a more traditional problem: how can we give an account of mental and intentional phenomena, specifically consciousness and the various forms of intentionality, that show how they are possible and how they function in a world that is entirely physical, that is, a world that consists entirely of physical particles and fields of force? I have provided an answer to that question in my book, *Intentionality*, where I discuss both the more important detailed questions of how intentionality works, together with the overall question of how mental phenomena fit into the physical world. Assuming we have an account of the mind and an account of language, these naturally lead into the next question:

3. The problem of intentionality naturally leads into the problem of consciousness. What exactly is the relationship between consciousness and the brain? In the end I think this is not a philosophical question, but rather one for neurobiology. However, it is very important at this stage in history that the question be clarified in such a way that it can receive a neurobiological answer. I have tried to do that in a number of writings, especially *The Rediscovery of the Mind* and *Minds, Brains and Science*. The general solution to the consciousness-

brain problem can be stated quite simply: consciousness is caused by lower level neuronal processes in the brain and is itself a higher level or system feature of the brain. Once this position is stated clearly in a way that avoids both dualism and materialism, it is then amenable to a scientific or neurobiological solution and I believe such a solution is now very much in the works. This is an area of science in which genuine progress is being made.

4. What is the nature of social and institutional reality? Human beings have a remarkable capacity not possessed by other animals, and that is the capacity to create an institutional reality of money, property, government, marriage, universities, etc. This is an extension of a more biologically general capacity, one shared by many other species of animals to form societies and social groups. What is special about human beings is not that there are human societies, because there are animal societies as well, what is special about human beings is that they are on the basis of their social relations capable of forming *institutional* relations –they form human institutions and within those institutions, institutional facts. How is all of that possible? I have written a book and a number of articles about this issue. The book is called, *The Construction of Social Reality*.

5. Rationality. Aristotle defined human beings as "rational animals," but what exactly is rationality? And indeed, how can we accommodate a conception of ourselves as rational beings in the naturalistic conception of the universe that I described earlier? I attempt to provide an answer to that question in the book, *Rationality in Action*, and that book is indeed an attempt to criticize a standard account of rationality, one which goes back many centuries in our tradition but which neglects the importance of free will in the account of rationality.

2. *Why do you think these topics are meaningful?*

I think it is obvious that these are the most important topics facing human beings. We need a philosophically satisfying account of ourselves and our relation to the rest of reality.

3. *What problems appear in your area of research?*

I have described most of these problems above. I would not wish to give the impression that these are the only problems in philosophy, but they are certainly the most important problems.

4. *Who are, in your opinion, the principle representatives of American philosophy?*

There are too many good practicing philosophers in the United States for me to even begin to give a list of them.

5. *Are there specific features of American philosophical paradigm? Which ones?*

I think the idea of specific national styles of philosophy is by now pretty much obsolete. There is a rough distinction between analytic philosophy and other kinds, and analytic philosophy tends to be practiced more in English speaking countries and in Scandinavia than it does in, for example, French speaking countries. However, there is no specific American philosophical paradigm. I received almost all of my philosophical education in England and I did not detect

any interesting difference between English philosophy of the sort that I do and American philosophy. So there is no such thing as "the American philosophical paradigm." There is an analytic philosophical paradigm, and that is a matter of family resemblance between different types of analytic philosophers rather than a specific essence of analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy tends to be marked by clarity, logical rigor and the activity of analysis, specifically the analysis of meanings and the analysis of larger questions.

6. *What are the trends of the school you belong to?*

I do not belong to any school. I am, broadly speaking, an analytic philosopher but this is hardly a school of philosophy.

7. *What topics of mind philosophy or postmodern philosophy are you interested in? What about the relation between philosophy and cognitive science, philosophy and literature?*

I have discussed these topics above. I will say in addition that I do not think there is a well defined notion of "postmodern philosophy." Most of what I have seen under this rubric is totally confused.

8. *What do you think about the purpose of philosophy in society and culture today?*

I have answered this question above. Philosophy is, to my mind, the most important subject. Every other subject has a philosophical aspect. All of the social sciences in particular have a philosophical component. If philosophy is defined in part as "the study of logical structures," and the social sciences are defined as "the study of society," then there is a necessary overlap between the two because society has a logical structure.

I do not believe there is a sharp distinction between philosophy and other disciplines, and in fact my work has overlapped with other disciplines in a number of important ways. Specifically I discovered that there was a massive error being committed in the field of artificial intelligence and consequently in cognitive science. At one time, many people believed that the brain was simply a digital computer and that mental processes were computational processes going on in the brain. I decisively refuted that view with an argument that came to be called "The Chinese Room Argument" in 1980. The view that I refuted, strong artificial intelligence, still survives in some quarters, but I think now it is effectively a matter largely of historical interest. We have moved in cognitive science from a computational based paradigm to a paradigm of cognitive neuroscience. I welcome this development.

My work also relates to the social sciences, and in fact I have frequently been invited to address social science gatherings such as the American Sociological Association and my work has been the subject of several issues of social science journals. Finally, there is an obvious connection between my work and the neurosciences, and indeed my last commissioned article that is an article specifically requested by a journal, was from the *Annual Review of Neuroscience* ("Consciousness"), and was published in 2002.