John Searle

Edited by BARRY SMITH

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY IN FOCUS

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John Searle

From his groundbreaking book *Speech Acts* to his most recent studies of consciousness, freedom, and rationality, John Searle has been a dominant and highly influential figure among contemporary philosophers. This systematic introduction to the full range of Searle's work begins with the theory of speech acts and proceeds with expositions of Searle's writings on intentionality, consciousness, and perception, as well as a careful presentation of the so-called Chinese Room Argument. The volume considers Searle's recent work on social ontology and his views on the nature of law and obligation. It concludes with an appraisal of Searle's spirited defense of truth and scientific method in the face of the criticisms of Derrida and other postmodernists.

This is the only comprehensive introduction to Searle's work. As such, it will be of particular value to advanced undergraduates, graduates, and professionals in philosophy, psychology, linguistics, cognitive and computer science, and literary theory.

Barry Smith is Julian Park Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo and director of the Institute for Formal Ontology and Medical Information Science at the University of Leipzig.

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1 | John Searle: From Speech Acts to Social Reality

BARRY SMITH

It was in the Oxford of Austin, Ryle, and Strawson that John Searle was shaped as a philosopher. It was in Oxford, not least through Austin's influence and example, that the seeds of the book *Speech Acts*, Searle's inaugural magnum opus, were planted.[1] And it was in Oxford that Searle acquired many of the characteristic traits that have marked his thinking ever since. These are traits shared by many analytic philosophers of his generation: the idea of the centrality of language to philosophy; the adoption of a philosophical method centred on (in Searle's case, a mainly informal type of) logical analysis; the respect for common sense and for the results of modern science as constraints on philosophical theorizing; and the reverence for Frege, and for the sort of stylistic clarity that marked Frege's writings.

In subsequent decades, however, Searle has distinguished himself in a number of important ways from other, more typical analytic philosophers. While still conceiving language as central to philosophical concerns, he has come to see language itself against the background of those neurobiological and psychological capacities of human beings that underpin our competencies as language-using organisms. He has embraced a radically negative stand as concerns the role of epistemology in contemporary philosophy. And he has braved territory not otherwise explored by analytic philosophers in engaging in the attempt to build what can only be referred to as a Grand Philosophical Theory. Finally, he has taken the respect for common sense and for the results of modern science as a license to speak out against various sorts of intellectual nonsense, both inside and outside philosophy.

Searle was never a subscriber to the view that major philosophical problems could be solved – or made to evaporate – merely by attending to the use of words. Rather, his study of the realm of language in *Speech Acts* constitutes just one initial step in a long and still unfinished journey embracing not only language but also the realms of consciousness and the mental, of social and institutional reality, and, most recently, of rationality, the self, and free will. From the very start, Searle has been animated, as he would

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phrase it, by a sheer respect for the facts – of science, or of mathematics, or of human behaviour and cognition. In *Speech Acts*, he attempts to come to grips with the facts of language – with utterances, with referrings and predicatings, and with acts of stating, questioning, commanding, and promising.

At the same time, Searle has defended all along a *basic* realism, resting not only on respect for the facts of how the world is and how it works, but also on a view to the effect that realism and the *correspondence theory* of truth 'are essential presuppositions of any sane philosophy, not to mention any sane science'.[2] The thesis of basic realism is not, in Searle's eyes, a theoretical proposition in its own right. Rather – and in this, he echoes Thomas Reid – it sanctions the very possibility of our making theoretical assertions in science, just as it sanctions the attempt to build a comprehensive theory in philosophy. This is because the theories that we develop are intelligible only as representations of how things are in *mind-independent* reality. Without the belief that the world exists, and that this world is rich in sources of evidence independent of ourselves – evidence that can help to confirm or disconfirm our theories – the very project of science and of building theories has the ground cut from beneath its feet.

Searle holds that the picture of the world presented to us by science is, with a very high degree of certainty, in order as it stands. He correspondingly rejects in its entirety the conception of philosophy accepted by many since Descartes, according to which the very existence of knowledge itself is somehow problematic. The central intellectual fact about the contemporary world, Searle insists, is that we already have tremendous amounts of knowledge about all aspects of reality, and that this stock of knowledge is growing by the hour. It is this that makes it possible for a philosopher to conceive the project of building unified theories of ambitious scope – in Searle's case, a unified theory of mind, language, and society – from out of the different sorts of knowledge that the separate disciplines of science have to offer. We thus breathe a different air, when reading Searle's writings, from that to which we are accustomed when engaging with, for example, Wittgenstein, for whom the indefinite variety of language-games must forever transcend robust classification.

As concerns the willingness to speak out, John Wayne–style, against intellectual nonsense, Searle himself puts it this way:

> If somebody tells you that we can never really know how things are in the real world, or that consciousness doesn't exist, or that we really can't communicate with each other, or that you can't mean 'rabbit' when you say 'rabbit,' I know that's false.[3]

Philosophical doctrines that yield consequences that we know to be false can themselves, by Searle's method of simple reductio, be rejected.

Searle uses this method against a variety of targets. He uses it against those philosophers of mind who hold that consciousness, or beliefs, or other denizens of the mental realm do not exist. He directs it against the doctrine of linguistic behaviourism that underlies Quine's famous 'gavagai' argument in *Word and Object*[4] for the indeterminacy of translation. As Searle puts it: 'if all there were to meaning were patterns of stimulus and response, then it would be impossible to *discriminate* meanings, *which are in fact discriminable*'.[5] Searle insists that he, like Quine and everyone else, knows perfectly well that when he says 'rabbit' he means 'rabbit' and not, say, 'temporal slice of rabbithood'. Quine, he argues, can arrive at the conclusion of indeterminacy only by assuming from the start that meanings as we normally conceive them do not exist.

When Searle turns his nonsense-detecting weapons against the likes of Derrida, then the outcome is more straightforward, being of the form: 'He has no clothes!' Searle points out what is after all visible to anyone who cares to look, namely, that Derrida's writings consist, to the extent that they are not simple gibberish, in evidently false (though admittedly sometimes exciting-sounding) claims based (to the extent that they are based on reasoning at all) on simple errors of logic.

SPEECH ACT THEORY: FROM ARISTOTLE TO REINACH

Aristotle noted that there are uses of language, for example prayers, that are not of the statement-making sort.[6] Unfortunately, he confined the study of such uses of language to the peripheral realms of rhetoric and poetry, and this had fateful consequences for subsequent attempts to develop a general theory of the uses of language along the lines with which, as a result of the work of Austin and Searle, we are now familiar.

Two philosophers can, however, be credited with having made early efforts to advance a theory of the needed sort. The first, significantly, is Thomas Reid, who recognized that the principles of the art of language are

> to be found in a just analysis of the various species of sentences. Aristotle and the logicians have analyzed one species – to wit, the *proposition*. To enumerate and analyze the other species must, I think, be the foundation of a just theory of language.[7]

Reid's technical term for uses of language such as promisings, warnings, forgivings, and so on is 'social operations'. Sometimes he also calls them 'social acts', opposing them to 'solitary acts', such as judgings, intendings, deliberatings, and desirings. The latter are characterized by the fact that their performance does not presuppose any 'intelligent being in the universe' other than the person who performs them. A social act, by contrast, must be directed to some other person, and for this reason it constitutes a miniature 'civil society', a special kind of structured whole, embracing both the one who initiates it and the one to whom it is directed.[8]

The second is Adolf Reinach, a member of a group of followers of Husserl based in Munich during the early years of the last century who distinguished themselves from later phenomenologists by their adherence to philosophical realism. Husserl had developed in his *Logical Investigations*[9] a remarkably rich and subtle theory of linguistic meaning, which the group to which Reinach belonged took as the starting point for its own philosophical reflections on language, meaning, and intentionality. Husserl was interested in providing a general theory of how thought and language and perception hook onto extra-mental reality. His conception of meaning anticipates that of Searle in treating language as essentially representational. Husserl's theory of meaning is, however, internalistic in the following special sense: it starts from an analysis of the individual mental act of meaning something by a linguistic expression as this occurs in silent monologue. The meaning of an expression is the same (the very same entity), Husserl insists, independently of whether or not it is uttered in public discourse.

But how are we to analyze, within such a framework, the meanings of those special kinds of uses of language that are involved in promises or questions or commands? It was in the effort to resolve this puzzle that Reinach developed the first systematic theory of the performative uses of language, not only in promising and commanding but also in warning, entreating, accusing, flattering, declaring, baptizing, and so forth – phenomena that Reinach, like Reid before him, called 'social acts'.[10]

Reinach presented his ideas on social acts in a monograph published in 1913 (four years before his death on the Western Front) under the title *The A Priori Foundations of the Civil Law*. He concentrated especially on the act of promising, applying his method also to the analysis of legal phenomena such as contract and legislation and describing the theory that results as a 'contribution to the general ontology of social interaction'. His work comprehends many of the elements that we find in the writings of Austin and Searle, and even incorporates additional perspectives deriving from

Reinach's background as a student of law. Unfortunately, however, Reinach's theory of social acts was doomed, like Reid's theory of social operations before it, to remain almost entirely without influence.

SPEECH ACT THEORY: FROM AUSTIN TO SEARLE

Anglo-American philosophy during the first half of the twentieth century was shaped above all by the new Frege-inspired logic. One side-effect of the successes of this new logic was to consolidate still further the predominance of the Aristotelian conception of language as consisting essentially of statements or propositions in the business of being either true or false. All the more remarkable, therefore, is the break with these conceptions that is represented by the work of Austin and Searle. The beginnings of this break are documented in Austin's 1946 paper "Other Minds,"[11] in a discussion of the way we use phrases such as 'I am sure that' and 'I know that' in ordinary language. Saying 'I know that S is P', Austin tells us, 'is *not* saying "I have performed a specially striking feat of cognition . . .".' Rather, 'When I say "I know" I give others my word: I give others my authority for saying that "S is P"' (*Philosophical Papers*, p. 99).

And similarly, Austin notes, 'promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending'. Promising does indeed presuppose an intention to act, but it is not itself a feat of cognition at all. Rather, when I say 'I promise',

> I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using this formula (performing this ritual), I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way. (p. 99)

Austin's ideas on what he called *performative utterances* were expressed in lectures he delivered in Harvard in 1955, lectures that were published posthumously under the title *How to Do Things with Words*.[12]

Performative utterances are those uses of language, often involving some ritual aspect, that are themselves a kind of action and whose very utterance brings about some result. Of an utterance such as 'I promise to mow your lawn', we ask not whether it is true, but whether it is successful. The conditions of success for performatives Austin called *felicity conditions*, and he saw them as ranging from the highly formal (such as, for example, those governing a judge when pronouncing sentence) to the informal conventions governing expressions of gratitude or sympathy in the circumstances of everyday life. Austin pointed also to the existence of a further set of conditions, which have to do primarily with the mental side of

performatives – conditions to the effect that participants must have the thoughts, feelings, and intentions appropriate to the performance of each given type of act.

RULES, MEANINGS, FACTS

By the end of *How to Do Things with Words*, however, Austin has given up on the idea of a theory of performatives as such. This is because he has reached the conclusion that all utterances are in any case performative in nature, and thus he replaces his failed theory of performatives with the goal of a theory of speech acts in general. Austin himself focused primarily on the preliminaries for such a theory, and above all on the gathering of examples. In "A Plea for Excuses,"[13] he recommended as systematic aids to his investigations three 'source-books': the dictionary, the law, and psychology. With these as his tools, he sought to arrive at 'the meanings of large numbers of expressions and at the understanding and classification of large numbers of "actions"' (*Philosophical Papers*, p. 189).

Searle's achievement, now, was to give substance to Austin's idea of a general theory of speech acts by moving beyond this cataloguing stage and providing a theoretical framework within which the three dimensions of utterance, meaning, and action involved in speech acts could be seen as being unified together.

It is the three closing sections of Chapter 2 of *Speech Acts* that prepare the ground for the full-dress analysis of speech acts themselves, which is given by Searle in the chapter that follows. These three sections contain Searle's general theories of, respectively, rules, meanings, and facts. All three components are fated to play a significant role in the subsequent development of Searle's thinking.

He starts with a now-familiar distinction between what he calls *regulative* and *constitutive* rules. The former, as he puts it, merely regulate antecedently existing forms of behaviour. For example, the rules of polite table behaviour regulate eating, but eating itself exists independent of these rules. Some rules, on the other hand, do not merely regulate; they also create or define new forms of behaviour. The rules of chess create the very possibility of our engaging in the type of activity that we call playing chess. The latter is just: acting in accordance with the given rules.

Constitutive rules, Searle tells us, have the basic form: X counts as Y in context C.[14] Consider what we call *signaling to turn left*. This is a product of those constitutive rules that bring it about that behaving inside moving vehicles in certain predetermined ways and in certain predetermined

contexts *counts as* signaling to turn left. The action of lifting your finger in an auction house *counts as* making a bid. An utterance of the form 'I promise to mow the lawn' in English *counts as* putting oneself under a corresponding obligation. And as we see from these cases, the Y term in a constitutive rule characteristically marks something that has consequences in the form of rewards, penalties, or actions that one is obliged to perform in the future. The constitutive rules themselves rarely occur alone, so it may be that when applying the *X counts as Y* formula we have to take into account whole systems of such rules. Thus we may have to say: acting in accordance with all or a sufficiently large subset of these and those rules by individuals of these and those sorts *counts as* playing basketball.

The central hypothesis of Searle's book can now be formulated as follows: speech acts are acts characteristically performed by uttering expressions in accordance with certain constitutive rules. In order to give a full analysis of what this involves, Searle must give an account of the difference between merely uttering sounds and performing speech acts, and this means that he must supply an analysis, in terms of the *counts as* formula, of what it is to *mean something* by an utterance. His analysis stands in contrast to that of Husserl (or of Aristotle) in the sense that it starts not with uses of language as they occur in silent monologue but rather with acts of speech, acts involving both a speaker and a hearer. More precisely still, Searle starts with the utterance of sentences, since he follows Frege in conceiving word meanings as derivative of sentence meanings. Searle is inspired, too, by the notion of non-natural meaning advanced by Grice in 1957.[15] His analysis, then, reads as follows:

To say that a speaker utters a sentence *T* and means what he says is to say that the following three conditions are satisfied:

> (*a*) the speaker has an intention *I* that his utterance produce in the hearer the awareness that the state of affairs corresponding to *T* obtains,
> (*b*) the speaker intends to produce this awareness by means of the recognition of the intention *I*,
> (*c*) the speaker intends that this intention *I* will be recognized in virtue of the rules governing the elements of the sentence *T*. (*Speech Acts*, pp. 49 f., parentheses removed)

The *X counts as Y* formula is here applied as follows: a certain audio-acoustic event *counts as* the meaningful utterance of a sentence to the extent that these three conditions are satisfied.

On the very next page of *Speech Acts*, Searle then introduces the concept of 'institutional fact', defined as a fact whose existence presupposes the

existence of certain *systems of constitutive rules* called 'institutions'. He refers in this connection to a short paper entitled "On Brute Facts," in which Elisabeth Anscombe addresses the issue of what it is that makes behaving in such and such a way a *transaction* from which obligations flow.

'A set of events is the ordering and supplying of potatoes, and something is a bill,' she tells us, 'only in the context of our institutions':

> As compared with supplying me with a quarter of potatoes we might call carting a quarter of potatoes to my house and leaving them there a 'brute fact'. But as compared with the fact that I owe the grocer such-and-such a sum of money, that he supplied me with a quarter of potatoes is itself a brute fact.[16]

Brute facts are, for Anscombe, themselves such as to form a hierarchy. The brute facts, in cases such as those just described, are

> the facts which held, and in virtue of which, in a proper context, such and such a description is true or false, and which are more 'brute' than the alleged fact answering to that description. . . . I will not ask here whether there are any facts that are, so to speak, 'brute' in comparison with leaving a quarter of potatoes at my house. (p. 24)

For Searle, by contrast, there is one single level of brute facts – constituted effectively by the facts *of natural science* – out of which there arises a hierarchy of institutional facts at successively higher levels. Brute facts are distinguished precisely by their being independent of all human institutions, including the institution of language.

It is of course necessary to use language in order to state brute facts, but the latter nonetheless obtain independently of the language that we use to represent them. Just as the Moon did not come into existence with the coming into existence of the linguistic resources needed to name and describe it, so the fact that the Earth is a certain distance from the Sun did not become a fact because the linguistic resources needed to express this distance became available at a certain point in history.

When you perform a speech act, you create certain institutional facts (you create what Reid referred to as a miniature 'civil society'). Institutional facts exist only because we are here to treat the world and each other in certain, very special (cognitive) ways within certain special (institutional) contexts. In his later writings, Searle will speak of a contrast between observer-independent features of the world – such as force, mass, and gravitational attraction – and observer-relative features of the world – which include, in particular, money, property, marriage, and

government. The latter are examples of institutions in Searle's sense, which means that they are systems of constitutive rules. Every institutional fact – for example, the fact that John promised to mow the lawn – is thus 'underlain by a (system of) rule(s) of the form "X counts as Y in context C"' (*Speech Acts*, pp. 51 f.).

Searle goes further than Austin in providing not only the needed general framework for a theory of speech acts but also a richer specification of the detailed structures of speech acts themselves. Thus he distinguishes between two kinds of felicity conditions: conditions on the *performance* of a speech act and conditions on its *satisfaction*. (You need to fulfil the first in order to issue a promise, the second in order to keep your promise.) Conditions on performance are divided still further into preparatory, propositional, sincerity, and essential conditions (*Speech Acts*, pp. 60 ff.). When I promise to mow your lawn, the preparatory conditions are that you want me to mow your lawn, and that I believe that this is the case, and that neither of us believes that I would in any case mow your lawn as part of the normal course of events; the propositional conditions are that my utterance 'I promise to mow your lawn' predicates the right sort of act on my part; the sincerity condition is that I truly do intend to mow your lawn; and the essential condition is that my utterance *counts as* an undertaking on my part to perform this action.

In "A Taxonomy of Illucutionary Acts,"[17] Searle offers an improved classification resting on a distinction between two 'directions of fit' between language and reality – from word to world, on the one hand, and from world to word, on the other. The shopping list you give to your brother before sending him off to the shops has a world-to-word direction of fit. The copy of the list that you use for checking on his return has a direction of fit in the opposite direction. *Assertives* (statements, averrings) have a word-to-world direction of fit; *directives* (commands, requests, entreaties) have a world-to-word direction of fit, as do *commisives* (*promises*), which bind the speaker to perform a certain action in the future. *Expressives* (congratulations, apologies, condolences) have no direction of fit; they simply presuppose the truth of the expressed proposition. *Declaratives* (appointings, baptizings, marryings), by contrast, bring about the fit between word and world by the very fact of their successful performance.

PROMISE AND OBLIGATION

On more traditional accounts, a promise is the expression of an act of will or of an intention to act. The problem with this account is that it throws

no light on how an utterance of the given sort can give rise to an obligation on the part of the one who makes the promise. A mere act of will has, after all, no quasi-legal consequences of this sort. Searle explains how these consequences arise by means of his theory of constitutive rules. The latter affect our behaviour in the following way: where such rules obtain, we can perform certain special types of activities (analogous to playing chess), and in virtue of this our behaviour can be interpreted by ourselves and by others in terms of certain very special types of institutional concepts. Promisings are utterances that count as falling under the institutional concept *act of promise*, a concept that is logically tied to further concepts, such as obligation, in such a way that wherever the one is exemplified, so too is the other. When I engage in the activity of promising, I thereby subject myself in a quite specific way to the corresponding system of constitutive rules. In virtue of this, I count as standing under an obligation.

Such systems of constitutive rules are the very warp and woof of our behaviour as language-using animals. As Searle puts it, we could not throw all institutions overboard and 'still engage in those forms of behaviour we consider characteristically human' (*Speech Acts*, p. 186).

It is against this background that Searle gives his famous derivation of 'ought' from 'is'. This consists in the move, in four logical steps, from a statement about a certain utterance to a conclusion asserting the existence of a certain obligation, as follows:

(1) Jones uttered the words 'I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars.'
(2) Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars.
(3) Jones placed himself under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
(4) Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
(5) Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars. (*Speech Acts*, p. 177)

The move from (1) to (2) is sanctioned, Searle holds, by an empirical fact about English usage to the effect that anyone who utters the given words makes a corresponding promise (provided only that, as can here be assumed to be the case, the conditions on successful and nondefective performance of the act of promising are as a matter of fact satisfied). The move from (2) to (3) follows from what Searle sees as an analytic truth about the corresponding institutional concepts – namely, that a promise *is* an act of placing oneself under a corresponding obligation. Similarly, we go from (3) to (4) and from (4) to (5) in virtue of what Searle takes to be analytic truths – namely, that if one has placed oneself under an obligation then one is under an obligation, and that if one is under an obligation then (as regards this obligation) one ought to perform the corresponding action.

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