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Reality Principles: An Interview with John R. Searle

Eminent philosopher John R. Searle defends free speech, free inquiry, and the Enlightenment.

STEVEN POSTREL AND EDWARD FESER | FROM THE FEBRUARY 2000 ISSUE

In an intellectual scene filled with critics of the Enlightenment's quest for a coherent understanding of the way the world works, philosopher John R. Searle has become a high-profile defender and exemplar of Enlightenment methods. A professor of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley and the author of 10 books, he attacks big questions–the nature of reality, the mind/body problem, the nature of consciousness–in what he sees as a continuation of the Enlightenment's scientific and philosophical program.

Along the way, he has become a leading voice in the debates over the possibility of artificial intelligence. Among A.I. researchers and cognitive scientists, he is most famous, and controversial, for his "Chinese Room" thought experiment, which attacks the idea that intelligence is merely rapid computation.

"Philosophy in the Real World," the subtitle of his most recent book, Mind, Language, and Society (1998), captures two important aspects of Searle's work: First, he focuses his rigorous philosophical explorations on our common sense of how the "real world" works. Searle believes that good philosophical inquiry begins by paying close attention to everyday experiences, such as speech, and noticing their strangeness. "We have to begin by approaching the problem naively," he has said. "We have to let ourselves be astounded by facts that any sane person would take for granted."

Second, Searle believes that the world is in fact real, not a mere construct of texts and word games, and that we can understand that real world–a position known as "metaphysical realism." He is famous as a vocal and vigorous defender of reason, objectivity, and intellectual standards within the academy. In 1977, he engaged in a highly publicized and often nasty debate over deconstruction's logical incoherence with French critic Jacques Derrida.

Searle, 67, says he's not particularly political, preferring intellectual life: "It's more fun. In the long run it's more satisfying" than political life. But his intellectual convictions have led periodically to political controversy. As an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, he was active in Students Against McCarthy, a group opposed to Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee. He left Wisconsin at 19 to study at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, returning to the United States in 1959, when he joined the Berkeley faculty. A proud supporter of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in the early 1960s, he is concerned today with the erosion of free speech, free inquiry, and academic standards on college campuses.

Searle was interviewed in his Berkeley office in November by Edward Feser (star3brn@1stnetusa.com), who teaches philosophy at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, and Steven Postrel, an economist who teaches business strategy at the University of California, Irvine. Searle's arm was in a sling–he broke it in a household accident he finds particularly embarrassing to discuss given his fracture-free years as an avid skier–and his office was a bustle of activity, with research assistants and students coming and going.

Reason: In your book *Mind, Language, and Society*, you say you're going to defend the "Enlightenment vision." How would you define this vision, and why does it need defense?

John R. Searle: During the 18th century primarily, but even going back longer in history, there was a movement, largely in Western Europe, that sought to throw off various kinds of superstitions. The parts of this "Enlightenment vision" that I find most impressive are the ideas

that the attainment of scientific truth and the advance of human rights and democratic government would lead to enormous possibilities for human progress. And, despite a lot of setbacks, something like that happened.

In the past few decades there has been a movement sometimes described as the "postmodern movement." There's no single word that's really adequate to describe it, but that's one that the people [involved] typically accept. In many respects, they see themselves as challenging the Enlightenment vision that there is an independently existing reality, that we can have a language that refers in some clear and intelligible way to elements of that reality, and that we can obtain objective truth about that reality. They advance the view that what we think of as reality is largely a social construct, or that it's a device designed to oppress the marginalized peoples of the world–the colonial peoples, women, racial minorities. They see the attempt to attain rationality and truth and knowledge as some kind of power play, and what they want instead is what they take to be more liberating–a rejection of the rationalist view.

Reason: One version of "postmodernism" which you discuss is "relativism." There are many varieties of relativism, and it's pretty clear from your book that you take the arguments for these views to be pretty bad.

Searle: I think they're terrible.

Reason: How did you characterize these arguments, and what do you think is wrong with them?

Searle: There are a number of arguments. The one that most affects people today is what I call "perspectivalism." That's the idea that we never have unmediated access to reality, that it's always mediated by our perspectives. We have a certain perspective on the world, we have a certain position in society that we occupy, we have a certain set of interests that we articulate, and it's only in relation to these perspectives that we can have knowledge of reality. So the argument goes, because all knowledge is perspectival there is no such thing as objective knowledge–you can't really know things about the real world or about things as they are in themselves.

Now that's just a bad argument. I grant you the tautology: All knowledge is our knowledge. All knowledge is possessed by human beings who operate in a certain context and from a certain perspective. Those seem to me to be trivial truths. But the conclusion that therefore you can never have objectively valid knowledge of how things really are just doesn't follow. It's a bad argument. And that's typical of a whole lot of these arguments.

Reason: You've debated Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida. Are they making bad arguments, or are they just being misread?

Searle: With Derrida, you can hardly misread him, because he's so obscure. Every time you say, "He says so and so," he always says, "You misunderstood me." But if you try to figure out the correct interpretation, then that's not so easy. I once said this to Michel Foucault, who was more hostile to Derrida even than I am, and Foucault said that Derrida practiced the method of *obscurantisme terroriste* (terrorism of obscurantism). We were speaking French. And I said, "What the hell do you mean by that?" And he said, "He writes so obscurely you can't tell what he's saying, that's the obscurantism part, and then when you criticize him, he can always say, 'You didn't understand me; you're an idiot.' That's the terrorism part." And I like that. So I wrote an article about Derrida. I asked Michel if it was OK if I quoted that passage, and he said yes.

Foucault was often lumped with Derrida. That's very unfair to Foucault. He was a different caliber of thinker altogether.

I think I sort of understand Richard Rorty's view, because I've talked to him more, and he's perfectly clearheaded in conversation. What Rorty would say is that he doesn't really deny that there's an external world. He thinks nobody denies that. What Rorty says is that we never really have objective knowledge of that reality. We ought to adopt a more pragmatic approach and think of what we call "truth" as what's useful to believe. So we shouldn't think of ourselves as answerable to an independently existing reality, though he wouldn't deny that there is such a thing.

The problem that all these guys have is that once you give me that first premise–that there is a reality that exists totally independently of us–then the other steps follow naturally. Step 1, external realism: You've got a real world that exists independently of human beings. And step 2: Words in the language can be used to refer to objects and states of affairs in that external reality. And then

step 3: If 1 and 2 are right, then some organization of those words can state objective truth about that reality. Step 4 is we can have knowledge, objective knowledge, of that truth. At some point they have to resist that derivation, because then you've got this objectivity of knowledge and truth on which the Enlightenment vision rests, and that's what they want to reject.

Reason: You are continuing your own Enlightenment program to try to solve what you think are the unsolved problems of that tradition. Could you describe how you ended up involved in this project?

Searle: My primary interest is not in fighting this lunatic fringe. The main thrust of my philosophical work is constructive.

I started off with language: How does language relate to reality? People can say, "You've said something true or false, or relevant, or irrelevant, or intelligent or stupid"–and that's a remarkable fact. In the style of philosophy, we ought to be astounded by what any sane person takes for granted, namely that by flapping this hole in my face and making noises I can give a lecture, or advance a thesis, or convince people, or all the other things you can do with language.

So I wrote my first book about that. I said speaking a language is performing certain kinds of speech acts according to rules, and I laid out the rules by which we make statements, ask questions, give orders, explanations, commands, promises, threats, vows, pledges, and all the rest of it.

My first two books were about that: speech acts. During the writing of those books, I talked about beliefs and desires and intentional actions, and that's like borrowing money from a bank: If you're going to use those notes, you've got to pay that back. You've got to at some point sit down and explain what the hell is a belief, what is an intention, what is a desire.

So I wrote another book, and this was the hardest book I ever wrote, Intentionality. It took me almost 10 years to write that book. I put all that together: What are the foundations of language in the operation of the mind? Because the meaningfulness of language is an extension of the more biologically fundamental characteristics of the mind. "Intentionality" doesn't just mean intending, but it means any way that the mind has of referring to objects and states of affairs in the world. So not just intending is intentionality but believing, desiring, hoping, fearing–all of those are intentional in this philosopher's sense.

Part of the fun of this profession is that if you solve one problem, it gives you three others. One of the problems it opened up was, How does the mind fit into the real world? How is the mind part of reality? That's the traditional mind/body problem.

So I wrote a couple of books about that, and in the course of that work I discovered that there was this new science that I would become a part of, "cognitive science." That was great, because cognitive science was overcoming "behaviorism," which had been the orthodoxy in psychology.

Reason: What do you mean by behaviorism?

Searle: Behaviorism was the idea that when you do a scientific study of the mind, you don't actually try to get inside the brain and figure out what's going on, you just study overt behavior.

Reason: Inputs and outputs?

Searle: Inputs and outputs. And the science of psychology on the behaviorist model was you were going to correlate these stimulus inputs with the behavioral outputs. It's a ridiculous conception of the mind–the idea is that there's nothing going on in there, except you have the stimulus input and the behavioral output.

The best comment about behaviorism is the old joke about the two behaviorists after they just had sex. He says to her, "It was great for you, how was it for me?" (Laughter) If behaviorism were right, that ought to make perfectly good sense, because there's nothing going on in him except his behavior, and she's in a better position to observe his behavior than he is.

OK, so I thought, We're overcoming behaviorism. That's great. We're going to have a science of the mind that gets inside the brain. What I discovered was that all these people thought the mind was a computer program. So I had a big debate with them, and that's why I introduced the argument called the "Chinese Room" argument: I imagine myself carrying out this computer program for some cognitive capacity I don't have. I'm locked in a room shuffling Chinese symbols

according to the program. Now, it turns out, in my thought experiment, that I can give answers in Chinese that are as good as Chinese speakers'. But I don't understand Chinese, I'm just a computer. And if I don't understand Chinese by being a computer, neither does any other computer. Just running a program isn't enough for the mind.

I have had plenty of debates about that, and that still goes on. A book about 20 years of the Chinese Room is going to come out.

Reason: A little sick of that argument, are you?

Searle: I'm kind of bored with it, to tell you the truth. I tell people, "Look, I got an A in Chinese Room. I took the course for credit, I got my term paper in on time–why do I have to keep taking it over and over?"

Reason: Do people continue to come up with new arguments, or is this becoming a ritualized debate, like gun control or abortion?

Searle: I'm familiar with most of the moves. Sometimes you see wrinkles on them. One common move is to say, "Well, you don't understand Chinese: It's the whole room that understands Chinese." That's no good, because the reason I don't understand Chinese is that I have no way of knowing what the words mean. But then neither does the room. The room has no way to get from the syntax to the semantics. You can see that by imagining that I get rid of the room and do all of it in my own head: memorize the rules, memorize the box of symbols, and do all the calculations in my head, memorize the program. But even still I don't understand Chinese, because I have no way to get from the syntax, the formal symbols, to what they mean.

As I said, part of the fun is when you get some questions solved, you get a whole bunch of others. There's a question that's always bothered me and that is, How can there be an objective reality that's only real because we think it's real? Take money. I mean, it's just bits of paper. But it works. People don't say, "Well, maybe *you* think that's money, but we don't." They accept it, and it works. And what goes for money goes for universities and property and marriage and journal interviews and language in general, and cocktail parties and tenure and a whole lot of other things that are socially constructed–they're socially created. And I wrote a book about how that works: How does the mind of an individual cooperating with other individual minds create or construct a social reality that can then have an objective existence? So, even if I stop thinking it's money, it has an institutionalized status, so it still remains money. It isn't just my opinion it's money.

But you still have a lot of problems left over. Right now I'm writing a book on rationality. That's a tough one. What makes behavior rational or irrational? What's the logical structure of the process of reasoning that results in a rational decision? And what kind of structure can do that? That's a hard question. And I think most of the accounts we have of that in decision theory and so on are really inadequate.

Reason: So you started out with language, then mind, then society, the whole set of bigger questions. Is there a relationship between language, mind, and society, and so forth that's inextricable?

Searle: If your theory isn't coherent, it's not a good theory. Now here's the overall picture: The world consists of entities that we find it convenient to call particles. That's it–there are just particles in fields of force, and everything else is consequences, or organizations, or effects of those particles.

Some of those particles are organized into systems, some of those systems are made largely of carbon-based atoms, and some of those carbon-based systems, especially the ones with lots of hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen, evolved into organic systems. And some of those organic systems now are alive, and those evolved by process of selection over long periods of time into living organisms.

Some of those living organisms have got neurons, and some of those neuron-based systems have got consciousness and intentionality. That's where I come in. I've got nothing to say about that other stuff. All the other stuff, from the quantum mechanical level right up through evolutionary biology, I just get out of undergraduate textbooks. I come in when we get to systems that have consciousness and intentionality.

Then it seems to me you've got a lot of fascinating questions, and that's what I'm interested in. How do consciousness and intentionality work in the brain? How is it they function logically–what are the logical structures of these phenomena? How does one organism relate to the consciousness and intentionality of other organisms? How do you get the structure of language? How does language give you the basis for the rest of society?

Now that, I think, is a continuation of the Enlightenment project. We want a unified account of our knowledge, and I think we can get it.

Reason: While the approach is different, the intention isn't that different from something like E.O. Wilson's *Consilience*, trying to unify all knowledge into a single structure.

Searle: Right. I don't agree with the details, but he's certainly somebody whom I would think of as sharing my overall objectives.

Reason: So would you say that the same unity would be true of facts and values? Or are you more of a Humean?

Searle: What I'm doing now in my book on rationality is to try to show how we shouldn't be thinking in terms of ethics vs. science. We ought to think of what we call ethics as a branch of practical reasoning–how the conscious, intentional organism reasons about what to do, particularly if the organism's got a language. If you think of it that way, then the traditional debates between ethics and science seem kind of irrelevant.

I'm not attacking the traditional philosophical problem head-on, because I think that gets us nowhere. I'm trying to show that there's a different way of looking at these issues, about the relation of the individual and culture, about the relation of biology and culture, the relation between the mind and the body. And if you look at it from this different point of view, then it seems to me you get different and more truthful results.

Now this carries over to political philosophy. It seems to me that we don't have what I would call a political philosophy from the middle distance. Let me give you an example. It seems to me the leading sociopolitical event of the 20th century was the failure of socialism. Now that's an amazing phenomenon if you think about it, because in the middle years of this century, clever people thought there was no way capitalism could survive. When I was an undergraduate at Oxford in the 1950s, the conventional wisdom was that capitalism, because it is so inefficient and so stupid, because there's not a controlling intelligence behind it, cannot in the long run compete with an intelligently planned economy.

It's hard today to recover how widely that view was held among serious intellectuals. Very intelligent people thought that in the long run capitalism was doomed, and some kind of socialism was our future. Some people thought it was Marxist socialism, and other people thought we were going to have democratic socialism, but somehow or another it had to be socialism.

Where is it today? It's dead. Even the European socialist parties, though they still keep the names, are adopting various versions of capitalist welfare states. I would like an intelligent analysis of this, and I can't find it.

Reason: You mean why people believed it?

Searle: Why it failed. Why did that belief die so spectacularly? I'm not convinced that we even have the apparatus necessary to pose an answer to the question. I think we need a conceptual improvement, and it would be piecemeal. It would be like the additions that Max Weber made when he introduced notions like rationalization, charisma, and all the rest of it.

Reason: Along these lines, you wrote an article for a German paper in which you said that Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* was the "book of the century."

Searle: Like every other undergraduate of my generation, when Hayek's book came out, I found it was treated as an object of ridicule. I remember a professor of economics saying, "Hayek is the last of the Mohicans of the classical economists. He's the last one left, holding this absurd view that's long since been refuted."

As a result, I never read the book when I was a student, but many, many years later, I sat down and read it, and it seems to me a remarkable book to have written in 1944. It's a kind of a prophetic book. If we're going to talk about the failure of socialism, an awful lot of the failures

had to do with exactly what Hayek predicted. It would be interesting for somebody to analyze in a more scholarly vein to what extent he was right: that there wasn't any halfway point of democratic socialism, that it would naturally collapse into various forms of oppression, that however well-intentioned the setting up of the socialist bureaucracy was, it would be bound to have calamitous effects.

So I was asked by this very prestigious German magazine–it's a weekly newspaper really, *Die Zeit* –what was the book of the century. Of course, there are a lot of books that I admire, but many were already taken by others, and I couldn't pick Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance. So I fastened onto Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* and wrote an article [about] why I thought that was, if not *the* book of the century, certainly among the books of the century.

Reason: What was the response?

Searle: I got a fair number of letters, all sympathetic. And a lot of my fellow professors who read German were impressed by it and agreed with me that Hayek had seen the limitations of socialism.

Reason: The tide is turning in his favor?

Searle: I think it is.

Reason: Among the academics?

Searle: Yeah. I think he's becoming more respectable. There are books out about him. Now I don't know the details of his work well enough to make an intelligent appraisal of it. I think he overstates some of his cases. He says, for example–not in *The Road to Serfdom* but somewhere else–"If there's one message that I would like to leave, it is that there's really no such thing as social justice." That justice is always something that goes on at an individual level. You might do an injustice to me, or I might get an unjust decision out of the courts, but the idea that there's such a thing as justice at the level of society–he rejects that. And I'm not sure he's right to reject that.

I'd like to think that through more, because I sense that the idea that there are socially just and socially unjust forms of social organizations would follow from my account of social reality–that you can create unjust social institutions. If you get massive inequities that become ossified, I would have doubts about it. But Hayek's point was that the inequities of a free market distribution system are not by themselves unjust. And I would agree with that up to a point.

One good thing about Hayek is he explodes this sort of glib talk that people have about social justice and social injustice. If you're going to talk about a gain in social justice, you'd better know exactly what you mean.

Reason: At least some aspects of your recent work, such as your book on the construction of social reality, resonate with certain themes in Hayek's work. Is there any influence there?

Searle: There wasn't, no. Because everybody spoke so badly of him, I never took Hayek seriously until after he was dead. I'm embarrassed to say that. When I wrote *Mind, Brains, and Science*, he wrote me a very gracious letter and sent me a book. I thought it was real nice, and I wrote him back and I was surprised to get his book on perception.

Reason: *The Sensory Order*?

Searle: The Sensory Order. It's quite interesting. But that came out of the blue–I mean, I was not a Hayek fan. I didn't know anything about Hayek.

Reason: He was known as a very wide reader.

Searle: Here's the irony: I'm an admirer of his. I'm sure I admire him far more than he ever admired me, but he read more of me than I did of him. (Laughter)

Reason: To get back to our earlier discussion, a lot of the radical ideas we talked about started gestating in the 1960s, as did a change in the role of politics in the university. You were involved in the Free Speech Movement (FSM) here at Berkeley.

Searle: I was very active.

Reason: I wonder if you could say a little bit about your role in it, and any reflections you might have.

Searle: In 1959, when I came back to the United States from Oxford, where I had been teaching, I wanted to be more active in the life of the community than I could be as an expatriate. I've always been active in civil liberties issues–I believe in human rights and especially the right to free speech and free expression. I was active in opposing what was then called the House Un-American Activities Committee. [HUAC] put out a movie called *Operation Abolition*, and this movie was going to be shown in the law school [at Berkeley]. I was asked to comment on the movie, and just a couple of hours before I was to address these law school students, they got a call from the chancellor's office saying my speech was canceled. I, an assistant professor in this university, was not to be allowed to address the students on this sensitive issue unless they got someone to rebut me.

This was in December of 1961, and at that point I decided this university was not deeply committed to free speech. So a couple of years later, when some students came to me and said, "We are campaigning on behalf of free speech," they found a sympathetic listener. I became extremely active on behalf of the FSM. In fact, I guess I was the first regular faculty member to come out for the FSM.

My disenchantment with student radicalism came not because of the FSM but because of the events that occurred afterwards. After the FSM abolished itself, there was this sense of expectation of the '60s [activists] that somehow they were going to revolutionize society and overthrow capitalism and do all kinds of things that I did not want. I wanted free speech. But I discovered that there were a lot of people who, when they got free speech, wanted a whole lot of other things that had nothing to do with free speech. Truth to tell, some of them didn't much care about free speech. They only wanted free speech for views that they agreed with.

So I was then placed in an awkward position: I thought that the forces that had become unleashed by the '60s were really threatening to the university. We wiped out the old chancellor and the old system of authority–totally destroyed it. So the new chancellor asked me if I would come in and work in his administration as his adviser on student affairs, and I did for two years. And that was much harder than the FSM, because that's when we had to put the revolution back in the bottle. You cannot run a major university on the principle of permanent revolution.

The result of that was that I lost a lot of my old friends. They wanted to keep the revolution going. I did not. I thought, one revolution is enough. But not everybody agreed with me, and there were a lot of tense times as a result of that. We did, however, succeed.

In '69 there was an off-campus event–the People's Park debacle–that really was not an on-campus student event. That was a battle primarily between the nonstudent element living on the south side and the university, and especially those state authorities when Reagan came in with the National Guard. But the battle for academic control of Berkeley had been won by '67. So what happened in Paris and Columbia and Harvard and Stanford and a whole lot of other places occurred after what had happened there.

Reason: What do you think of the prospects for the future?

Searle: I left my crystal ball in my other pajamas. (Laughter) I don't know which way it's going to go. I have a sense that the present generation of undergraduates just thinks all those old '60s ideas are ridiculous.

I think that the movement of the '60s has done a lot of long-term, permanent damage, in certain departments, because they gave up on their educational mission. Certain departments, especially in literature and cultural studies, are, as far as I can tell, permanently demoralized. But in the departments that I deal with most directly there has been almost no effect. The philosophy department today is pretty much the same kind of philosophy department we had here 30 years ago.

Reason: Your direct experience is positive?

Searle: My students are as good as ever, and maybe better than ever. My perspective is skewed by the fact that I happen to get really superior students. I teach very difficult upper division courses, and I get the most self-selected bunch of students in the university, because nobody takes the

courses who isn't highly motivated. You come to my lectures, and you'd be amazed at the quality of the questions asked.

But I don't teach many large freshman courses. When I did a few years ago I found I couldn't teach at the level that I could when I started teaching here in 1959. And the reason was that I could not take for granted the cultural references. I couldn't assume that everybody knew who Plato was. In 1959 the freshmen hadn't read Plato, but they had heard of him. But by, say, 1975, you couldn't assume that.

Also, affirmative action had a disastrous effect. We created two universities during affirmative action. We had a super-elite university of people who were admitted on the most competitive criteria in the history of the university, but then we had this other university of people who could not have been admitted on those criteria, and who had to have special courses and special departments set up for them.

Now affirmative action meant two completely different things. When it first started out the definition was that we were going to take affirmative actions to see that people who would never have tried to get into the university before would be encouraged and trained so that they could get admission. I was all for that–that we were going to get people into the competition who would otherwise not have been in the competition. What happened though, and this was the catastrophic effect, is that race and ethnicity became criteria not for encouraging people to enter the competition, but for judging the competition.

But now a lot of that is changing. The idea that we're going to admit people just on racial and ethnic criteria, we've given up on that. Now we're trying to get people prepared to compete in the university, and that's a good thing if we can do it.

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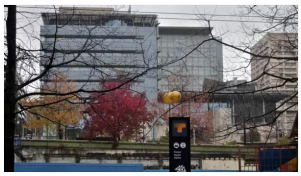

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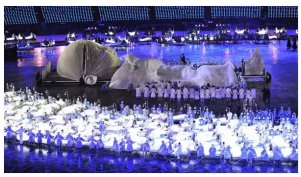

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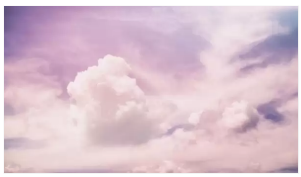

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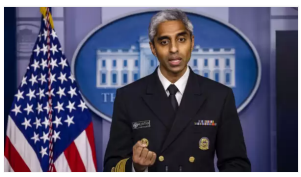

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