John Searle studied at Oxford in the heyday of “Natural Language Philosophy.” John Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein had a strong, lasting, and definitive influence upon his understanding of philosophy. Searle’s initial work was devoted to analyses of linguistic meaning in terms of speech acts, not simply sentences, and his 1969 publication *Speech Acts* is not only a classic but, more importantly, an important statement of his distinctive way of doing philosophy. Perhaps the most essential dimension of Searle’s conception of philosophical inquiry is its commitment to what might be called “common sense” or, alternatively, our “ordinary understanding,” which he will come to call the Background. As we will see, the concept of the Background may well be his central contribution to philosophy, despite the fact that it is Wittgenstein that first presented this discovery in his famous *One Certainty (Ueber Gewissheit).* He seldom tires of saying things like, “let’s remind ourselves of some basic facts” or “we all know that . . . “ and “That’s so basic I don’t know how to convince another of its truth.” Kant spoke about this type of relationship between philosophical scholarship and mundane life in terms of two conceptions – better, two aspects of – philosophy: namely, the scholastic concept (*Schulbegriff*) and the world concept (*Weltbegriff*). The most distinctive feature of Searle’s approach to philosophy is his commitment to dispelling scholastic philosophical inquiry of assumptions that undermine our basic sense of ourselves as conscious being capable of speech and action. This recuperative or “therapeutic” orientation to philosophy is also a hallmark of Wittgenstein’s later works. As we will see, it’s important not to confuse his insistence upon common sense as dogmatic or foundation, if only because what makes up our ordinary understanding of, and engagement with, the world is not a theory – a *folk-psychology, folk-biology, folk-linguistics,* etc. – but, instead, a form of know-how so essential as to count as constitutive of human existence.

Reading Searle’s works chronologically is revealing, not so much of his development, as of his basic understanding of philosophical inquiry. A philosophy of language begins and ends with the fact that we speak to and understanding one another, just as a philosophy of mind begins and ends with the fact that we have conscious states that constitute our ability to survive in the world. A social philosophy begins and ends with the fact that things like interest rates, laws, insults, constitutions, etc. are real, although largely “constituted by” the intentionality of individual agents. A critique of reason begins and ends with the fact that belief formation – theoretical rationality – aims at truth and that agency – practical rationality aims at freedom. Searle’s accounts of mind, language, society, and rationality stand at odds with most dominant trends in philosophy: e.g. materialist philosophies of mind and cognitive science; causal and “wide-content” theories of meaning; anti-individualist and social-constructivist approaches to social inquiry; and all forms of naturalism and scientism in theories of rationality. Searle holds that contemporary thinking about mind, language, and society are *fundamentally* misguided. We begin our readings chronologically, however, to capture one of
Searle’s basic and, indeed, inaugurating commitments: speech acts have meaning. Objectivistic approaches in the philosophy of language – e.g. Quine’s “meaning skepticism,” Kripke’s “causal theories of reference,” and Putnam’s “indexical account of natural kind terms,” Fodor’s “causal theories of meaning,” etc. – all of these denies, in some fashion or other, the claim that utterances have meaning because (at least in part) speaker mean something by them. For Searle, current orthodoxy in the philosophy of language ends up denying this basic fact.

In his third book, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Searle simply extends his analysis of linguistic meaning to mind – again, with a basic conviction that both have content. Said differently, any theory that denies that we have conscious states simply can’t be right. Although Searle uses the conceptual apparatus he developed in the philosophy of language to analyze the logical structure of mental states, he claims that the philosophy of mind is ontologically primary. Simply put, his order of explication reverses the order of ontological grounding: intentionality is more basic than linguistic meaning, despite the fact that the conceptual apparatus he developed first in the philosophy of language is used to explicate intentionality. In later works, Searle’s couples his logical analysis of intentionality with an ontological thesis concerning the reality of consciousness. The gist of his analysis of consciousness is that the dominant philosophies of mind – materialism or materialism cum functionalism, or strong artificial intelligence – are alike committed to Cartesian assumptions that are, at best false, if not simply incoherent.

Searle’s social philosophy is committed to ontological pluralism, in one respect, and yet ontological monism, in another. Things like tables and chairs, interest rates, plays, political movements, reaction formations, promotions, etc. are different types of things. Nevertheless, they are alike in one crucial respect: they are observer dependent because they are what they are only in being recognized or taken as such. The ontology of the social is one of attributed functions (notice the plural), where, for Searle, functions are not “intrinsic” but derived. Things do not have functions “intrinsically” – that is, in abstraction from their relation to intentional agents – but, instead, only owing the attribution of functionality. One of the most interesting aspects of Searle’s approach to social philosophy is his staunch insistence that things like obligations to keep one’s promises, to pay one’s bills, to honor contracts, etc. are real things in the social world that are not necessarily moral or ethical. In other words, the “ought” and the “is” hang together in a way that is anathema to something trained in the Humean tradition of social philosophy.

Finally, Searle’s accounts of theoretical and practical rationality reassert, in altered form, basic claims about human freedom and responsibility that are associated with Kantian approaches to the normative domain. Philosophical chestnuts like the problem of weakness of the will (akrasis), freedom and determinism, contradictory desires, “external” duty versus “internal” motivation, etc. – come front and center in the book. Searle makes original contributions in his account of practical rationality – why there cannot be a deduction logical of practical reasoning – and reasserts a central claim familiar from *The Construction of Social Reality*: namely, that normative obligations or “oughts” are a familiar feature of social coexistence and are generated, not exclusively as moral phenomena, but, instead, within ordinary social practices.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**


**RECOMMENDED TEXTS:**

Press.


SECONDARY TEXTS:

R.B. Nolte:
- Einfuehrung in die Sprechakttheorie John R. Searles (1978)


H. Parret and J. Vershueren (eds) (On) Searle on Conversation (1992)

E. Schaefer, Grenzen der Kuenstlichen Intelligenz, John R. Searle's Philosophie des Geistes (1994)


Francesca di Lorenzo Ajello, Mente, azione e linguaggio nel pensiero di John R. Searle (1998)


Nick Fotion, John Searle (2000)

William Hirstein, On Searle (2001)

J. Preston and M. Bishop (eds), View into the Chinese Room. New Essays on Searle and Artificial Intelligence (2002)

G. Grewendorf and G. Meggle (eds):


C. G. Prado, Searle and Foucault on Truth (2006)

Searle on Institutions, Anthropological Theory (2006)

READING SCHEDULE

FALL TERM:
Part One: Philosophy of Language

Week Two:
- “How Language Works: Speech as a Kind of Human Action” (MLS, 135-163)
- “Speech Acts” from SA
- “Taxonomy of Illocutionary Forms” from EM
- “Literal Meaning” from EM

Part Two: The Philosophy of Mind: The Logic of Intentionality

Week Three
- “The Nature of Intentional Acts” (I, pp. 1-36)
- “The Intentionality of Perception” (I, pp. 37-78)

Week Four:
- “Intention and Action” (I, pp. 79-111)
- “Intentional Causation” (I, pp. 112-140)
- “The Background” (I, pp. 141-160)

Week Five:
- “Meaning” (I, pp. 160-180)
- “Intensional Reports and Intentional States and Speech Acts” (I, pp. 180-197)

Week Six:
- “Are Meaning in the Head” (I, pp. 197-231)
- “Proper Names and Intentionality” (I, 231-262)

Part One: The Metaphysics of Mind: Unmasking Materialism as Neo-Cartesianism

Week Seven:
- “What’s Wrong with the Philosophy of Mind” (RM, pp. 1-27)
- “The Recent History of Materialism: The Same Mistake Over and Over” (RM, pp. 27-58)
- Appendix: “Is There a Problem about Folk Psychology” (RM, pp. 58-65)

Week Eight:
- Open

Week Nine:
- “Breaking the Hold: Silicon Brains, Conscious Robots, and Other Minds” (RM, pp. 65-83)
- “Consciousness and Its Place in Nature” (RM, pp. 83-111)
- “Reductionism and the Irreducibility of Consciousness” (RM, pp. 111-127)

Week Ten:
- Open

WINTER TERM:

Week One:
- “The Structure of Consciousness: An Introduction” (RM, pp. 127-151)
- “The Unconscious and its Relation to Consciousness” (RM, pp. 151-175)
- “Consciousness, Intentionality, and the Background” (RM, pp. 175-197)
Week Two:
- “The Critique of Cognitive Reason” (RM, pp. 197-227)
- “The Proper Study” (RM, pp. 227-249)

Week Three:
- Open

Part Three: Searle’s Critique of Theoretical and Practical Reason

Week Four:
- “The Classical Model of Rationality and Its Weaknesses” (RA, pp. 1-33)
- “The Basic Structure of Intentionality, Action, and Meaning” (RA, pp. 33-61)
- “The Gap: Of Time and the Self” (RA, pp. 61-97)

Week Five:
- “The Logical Structure of Reasons” (RA, pp. 97-135)
- “Some Special Features of Practical Reason: Strong Altruism as a Logical Requirement” (RA, pp. 135-167)

Week Six:
- “How We Create Desire-Independent Reasons for Action” (RA, pp. 167-214)
- Appendix: Internal and External Reasons (RA, pp. 214-219)
- “Weakness of Will” (RA, pp. 219-239)

Week Seven:
- Open

Week Eight:
- “Why There Is No Deductive Logic of Practical Reason” (RA, pp. 239-269)
- “Consciousness, Free Action, and the Brain” (RA, pp. 269-299)

Week Nine:

Week Ten: