

PROFESSOR JOHN SEARLE

Peter Strawson is justly famous for his large and lasting contributions to philosophy. I could devote this talk to summarizing those contributions, but they have been well described by others both here and in various publications. I want to use this occasion to talk about my personal impressions of him, and the enormous difference he made to my life. The single greatest intellectual influence on my life was Peter Strawson, and I want to describe some of his qualities both of intellect and personality that so impressed me.

I met Peter in the 1954-1955 Academic year, when I was a 22 year old undergraduate preparing for Schools in PPE. At that time, though still in his mid-30s, Peter was already a leading figure in what was a golden age of Oxford philosophy. Oxford had one of the finest collections of philosophers ever assembled in one place in human history. In fact, I think it is probably exceeded only by Ancient Athens. In Oxford there were no towering geniuses of the caliber of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, but there were a remarkable number of people who would have been famous philosophers in any era. As an undergraduate, I attended lectures and seminars not only by Peter, but by J L Austin, Paul Grice, Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Elizabeth Anscombe, Gilbert Ryle, H H Price, Iris Murdoch, Van Quine (a Visiting Professor), David Pears, Geoffrey Warnock, Mary Warnock, Friedrich Waismann, Philippa Foot, Herbert Hart, Michael Dummett, Bernard Williams, Tony Quinton, R M Hare, and lots of brilliant others. Though at the time we all took such distinction for granted, and thought Oxford would go on being great in philosophy forever, in fact it was a rare and special moment in intellectual history.

A favourite game among intellectually inclined students, especially Americans, was to argue over who was the best philosopher. Not just who was the cleverest, or the most erudite, but who was best *as a philosopher*. My candidate was always Peter Strawson. Yes, I

admired several of the others, but for a combination of intellectual rigour and philosophical depth, I thought Peter led the field. And truth to tell, he was the only one I felt who could be counted on to beat me in just about any philosophical argument. I could hold my own with many of the others, but not so with Peter.

I had heard him lecture and had read his writing before we met, but it was through Marie-Lyse Cantacuzene that we actually met. At my request she asked Peter if he would be willing to take me as a tutorial student. To my surprise and delight, he agreed. At first, my college, Christ Church, was reluctant to have me 'farmed out' (in the expression of that time). They already had three philosophy tutors and it would cost them money to hire someone else to tutor me. But as usual in Oxford, if you insist long enough and persistently you can often get your way, and I duly appeared once a week at Peter's rooms in Univ. I will try to describe to you what it was like for me to be tutored as an undergraduate by Peter Strawson. To begin with, he insisted on the essays a day in advance, something no other tutor had ever required of me. I typed the essays, never more than three or four pages, and he had read them by the time of my arrival. After the usual greetings we would sit down and he would begin, typically with something like the following.

'Now it does seem to me, Searle, (we were not yet on first name terms) that you are essentially arguing as follows.' Whereupon he would present an elegant, lucidly clear and powerful expression of what I had, in my fumbling way, been trying to say. 'Yes, yes!' I would cry out, 'That is exactly it. Those are exactly my points.'

'Well, if that is so, it does seem to me that the argument is subject to the following four objections.' Whereupon he would proceed to demolish the entire argument step by elegant step. And the odd thing was, that though none of my points was left standing, I did not feel in any way diminished or defeated. On the contrary, I was positively elated because it seemed to me then, as it does now, that Peter and I

were engaged in a common intellectual enterprise, the most wonderful intellectual enterprise of all: philosophical analysis; and I was being taught by the best living talent in the entire world at that enterprise. From Peter I learned how to write (or at least how to *try* to write) philosophical prose that was clear and rigorous, in the sense that each step followed from, or was at least supported by, the previous steps, and the overall structure was valid and perspicuously so. With Peter, as with Austin, looseness and sloppiness were never tolerated.

I would not wish to give the impression that with Peter it was all solemn hard work. On the contrary, doing philosophy with Peter was fun, and he had lots of other avenues of intellectual pleasure, especially poetry.

Over time, our discussions extended beyond the tutorial setting, and there came a delicate moment, whose import is probably incomprehensible today, when he addressed me by my first name, thus licensing me to use his first name. We were no longer just student and teacher, but good friends. And I became a regular visitor at 17 Banbury Road.

The Strawsons were wonderfully good hosts, and they gave countless dinner parties where both the food and the company were at a higher level than even that of the various 'High Tables' I knew. We also had long walks in the parks as well as just talks over coffee. Indeed, I am not sure that Peter and Ann were fully aware of how many different aspects of my life were affected by them. But they must have known that of my girl friends, two lived in their house (not at the same time!) and a third I met in their living room. When Peter went to America as a visiting professor, he left me in charge of teaching many of his students, and also loaned me his bicycle (again, it is hard today to convey the significance of leaving me *both* his students *and* his bicycle).

One incident will convey the extraordinary kindness and generosity of the Strawsons. In the summer of 1956 I took a long

continental trip with a friend, Jerry Kuehl, in an old car I had bought. Because we were mostly camping out and staying in Youth Hostels, I decided not to bother shaving. By the end of the summer in France, Italy, Austria, and Germany, I had a rather huge beard and looked like a cross between Karl Marx and Dostoevsky. I arrived back in Oxford with no place to stay and very little money. Without any forewarning, I knocked on the door at 17 Banbury. Peter came to the door and looked at me with no sign of recognition. 'Yes?' he said, with the air of a man confronting a total stranger, one he hopes will remain a stranger. 'Peter!' I said. 'It's me, John.' There then occurred what is usually known as the shock of recognition. The point of the story is that I was then invited into the house, and within minutes I was invited to *move* into the house. I am not sure that Galen will ever forgive me that he was forced to move out of his room and into his brother's room so that I could move into his room until I could get into my college rooms.

Peter was the most English of Englishmen (this, by the way, was before 'Britain' and 'Brits' in their current sense had been invented), and at the same time, he was the most cosmopolitan. He was very familiar with French literature and we had many discussions about our favourite French authors (though not, I might add, about contemporary French philosophers, of whom we admired practically none). Poetry meant almost as much to him as philosophy. And he once said to me that he thought it easier to attain immortality as a poet than as a philosopher, because the poems would be read and reread, but in philosophy the most we could reasonably hope for was that our ideas would live on, and that philosophical errors we had exposed would be avoided in the future (his example). I think he was mistaken about this point, and that his own works will be read and reread as much as the good poetry of our era.

At that time there was a certain amount of national competition on cultural as well as other matters between Britain and America. Peter regarded these questions of national pride with a certain irony. When he

was leaving for a visiting professorship in the United States, he said to me, 'If any Americans ask me who is my favourite American poet, I shall say T S Eliot. And if they ask me who my favourite American novelist is, I shall say Henry James.' In a Strawsonian spirit I responded, 'If any English guy asks me who is my favourite English poet, I'll say Wystan Auden.' In one of our arguments about Allied strategy during 'The War', Peter told me he thought that the only subject matter on which our two sets of opinions would divide on straight national lines, England v. America, was the conduct of the war. He inherited some of the same military genes as his brother, and one of his many eccentricities was the war game that he played with his friend John Carswell in the back garden of the house. For days at a time they would be engrossed in, obsessed by, the great military conflicts they had invented.

Peter was very proud of his children, sometimes in surprising ways. He once told me with a great sense of pride, 'My two sons have had seven children, by five different women.'

What I am trying to convey by all this is that Peter not only taught me how to do philosophy, but he had a profound effect on my whole mode of sensibility. Not so much because I came to share his... that would have been out of the question, but rather that by fully understanding and communicating with his, I came to have a deeper awareness of what it is to form a sensibility.

Peter was famous in Oxford for having gotten a Second. Given his intellect, I could not see how such a thing was possible. I discussed it with Isaiah Berlin, who had been one of his examiners. Here, according to Isaiah, is what happened. Lindsay, the other examiner, hated all this new fangled linguistic philosophy and wanted to give him a Third. Isaiah wanted to give him a First. They compromised on a Second. Isaiah told me he had always been ashamed of the compromise and that he should have held out for a First.

One of the major events in my philosophical development was a seminar conducted jointly by Peter Strawson and Paul Grice. Both were at the height of their intellectual powers. As usual, Peter provided a model of how one could at the same time be immensely cooperative and sympathetic to opposing views, and extremely tough in criticism, both of opposing views and his own. People often remarked, justifiably, on Peter's elegance, excellent manners and civility. I would emphasize that in this cooperative and civilized style, he was also firm and uncompromising. One of the things that most appealed to me about Peter as a philosopher was his resolute sense of reality and his rejection of silliness and pretentiousness. Here are two famous examples. First: His rejection of the idea that our ordinary explanations of human behaviour exhibit a false and obsolete 'folk psychology.' These folk psychological explanations, he liked to point out, are those used by such simple folk as Proust, Tolstoy and Henry James. Second: His discussion in 'Freedom and Resentment', where he correctly refutes the view that we might in actual practice treat other people as deterministic systems.

In a crude summary, I could say that Peter taught me how to do philosophy, enabled me to stay in Oxford after my undergraduate days were over, and helped to get my first jobs at Christ Church and Berkeley. But that would not convey what his friendship meant to me.

When a close friend dies after a long life, one tends to place in the background the fact that his life was long, complex and varied. For me, the Peter that I knew best was the one I remember from the first couple of decades after we met. He was supremely intelligent, but in a way that revealed a complex and subtle mind, with great wit, sophistication, irony, and personal elegance. In a typical philosophical discussion, Peter would be in a tweed jacket, his head tilted slightly to one side, and while removing a handkerchief from his jacket sleeve, and with an ironic half smile on his face, he would lean forward, and in a quiet and almost too cultured voice, he would make a devastating

objection that would destroy a muddled philosophical view. That is how I think of him now, and how I will always remember him.