



Jackson Kernion <jacksonkernion@gmail.com>

Tip: A famous philosophy professor is likely a sexual harasser

Jackson Kernion <jacksonkernion@gmail.com>

Tue, Sep 27, 2016 at 4:47 PM

To: Azeen.Ghorayshi@buzzfeed.com

I'm writing to you in the hope that you can shine a public light on the behavior of John Searle, a renowned academic in Berkeley's philosophy department. As a grad student in the department, I've always heard whispers of his creepy behavior: lectures that include racial slurs and hints of misogyny, his weird penchant for hiring young asian women as assistants, and not-entirely-confirmed cases of sexual harrasment and unwanted sexual advances. The grad students don't have much respect for him, either personally or professinally, and my sense is that feelings amongst the faculty are not much different. And yet he remains one of the most visible, most famous members of our department.

For years, grad students have voiced concerns about Searle through official channels, hoping for some official response. While there's been no publicly-announced sanctions or anything like that, it has been suggested to us that complaints about Searle have lead to...something. Searle is now officially retired but he continues to teach a very large lecture course, give seminars, and the university just this month officially opened the John Searle Center for Social Ontology.

Last week, I gave a presentation to our undergrad philosophy organization, Philosophy Forum, and we continued on an informal conversation at a nearby cafe afterwards. One of the things I take very seriously, as someone who may one day join the ranks of philosophy professors, is the general atmosphere of philosophy departments—in particular, how welcoming they are to women and minorities. (John Searle aside, academic philosophy has a pretty bad track record of encouraging women and minorities. It's something that leaders in the discipline have been working on with renewed energy, but it remains a massive problem.) And so I, at one point, asked whether everyone felt comfortable in the department and, if not, what sorts of things were most harmful. I was a little surprised by the group's response, which, to paraphrase, was: "You're talking about John Searle, right?" While I'd known that John Searle's presence in the department was harmful, I don't think I fully appreciated his outsized impact on our undergrads until this conversation. This group of undergrads all had the same general impression: his lectures are free-wheeling, ranty, and often veered into inappropriate territory. (For instance, he'll talk about "that towelhead Yasser Arafat" and refer to Germans as "Krauts". I, myself, have neve attended one of his lectures but memorable lines like these are frequently quoted and only scratch the surface.) But, more worryingly, the students also talked about worse behavior in office hours, in one on one meetings with female students. One student, a woman of South Asian descent, shared a story about how Searle continually referred to her using diminutives (like "Sweetie") and, for some reason, kept shifting into an impression of an Indian accent. More importantly, these sorts of behaviors shaded into a kind of obvious misogyny that made here feel uncomfortable. The general consensus was that this was in line with what the undergrads have come to expect from Searle and that other worse stories have floated around.

In my view, and I told the students this, Searle ought to be removed from the department immediately. And I worry that people in positions of power are so far removed from what's actually happening that they don't fully appreciate the significance of Searle's transgressions. But I *know* that the department has received complaints about Searle and that 'actions have been taken'. Yet the University has never publicly acknowledged his behavior and continues to put him in positions that allow him close contact with undergrads.

I left that meeting with a sense of urgency that I hadn't felt before. Sure, the grad students, basically universally, disapprove of the way the university/faculty have handled Searle's case. But can't something else be done? And if I didn't do anything about this, what kind of advocate for inclusion am I? Perhaps any drastic actions would negatively affect the philosophy department and my own reputation, but if this were to play any significant role in deciding what to do, wouldn't I be a coward?

So here's my motivation for reaching out to you. It's clear to me that the university won't ever voluntarily take away the privileges it grants Searle in terms of institutional support and the opportunity to teach undergraduates. It's equally

clear to me that the university won't, without outside pressure, make public their own investigations into Searle's behavior. And, in my view, once someone has been identified as a serial harasser, they ought to be named and shamed. The public conversation that ensues is often the only mechanism by which the public can force institutions to change in meaningful ways. And I also hope that someone with time and expertise can investigate and tie together all the loose strands of information floating around the philosophy department about Searle's behavior. Maybe there's less there than I expect. But the possibility of there being "only minor" transgressions here doesn't absolve any of us from the responsibility to do something when we think there might be something "major" going on. My sense is that there's already a great deal of information about episodes of sexual harassment out there, but no one has ever tried to put the pieces together. And I was hoping that getting in touch with an independent journalist would allow for such an investigation to occur.

Though I'd prefer not to be identified as the "whistleblower", I'm not particularly concerned about eventually being identified. If you're interested in pursuing this further, I can help provide names/emails of people who might have more information.

To that end, as I was thinking through what I should do about this, I reached out to another grad student who suggested to me, in the past, that he had been involved in bringing a complaint against Searle. In short, one of his undergrad students had told him that Searle had made a sexual advance on her. This grad student passed along this information to our department chair who, I'm told, met this news with an exasperated sigh, ~~saying something like "not again..."~~. The undergrad was a foreign exchange student, and though this grad student was led to believe that the Office for the Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination got involved, he's not sure if anything ever came of it, perhaps because the student returned to her home country. An excerpt from her email to this grad student is copied below. (Keep in mind that English isn't her first language.)

I now think this was an artifact of my retelling

"Everything in California seems to perfect. I, however, have one thing to chew on within couple of days. It is because of John Searle the famous professor. He is super famous for philosophy of mind.

"Umm.... I met him four days ago. And the day before yesterday, three days ago, he asked me to come to his office again. We met in his office. I thought of him as a nice person.

"At the end of our meeting, he asked me to go to another room, saying that there are more books that he could give me

"I was perfectly innocent, following him without any doubts. Upon opening the door, he sprang at me, putting every effort to kiss me.

"It was a sheer shock and surprise to me. I cannot believe the fact that he is such a famous and knowledgeable professor over the world.

"Of course we did not kiss each other. His trying makes me and my impression on Berkeley very sad, depressing, disturbing, disgusting and annoying."

- Jackson Kernion

Jackson Kernion :: Philosophy PhD student - UC Berkeley :: jacksonkernion.com