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Book Review

John Searle: Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization

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The subject matter of this book is the nature and mode of existence of institutional social reality, i.e. of nation-states, money, corporations, clubs and other social institutions. In the first part of the book Searle proposes an ontology of social institutions, in the second part he applies this theory to specific, mostly philosophical questions such as the nature of power, the status of human rights and the significance of rationality for life in human society. Many of the ideas presented in this book can already be found in Searle's earlier work *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995). The new book focuses on the relevance of social ontology for classical problems of philosophy, adding to the topics treated in *The Construction of Social Reality* a discussion of the role of human language in the construction of institutional reality and a discussion of free will, rationality, power, and human rights.

Searle's theory consists of a description and analysis of the structure of social institutions. The main thesis is that humans possess "the capacity to impose functions on objects and people where the objects and the people cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure. The performance of the function requires that there be a collectively recognized status that the person or object has, and it is only in virtue of that status that the person or object can perform the function in question" (7). Status functions result from rules constitutive for a practice which determine when x has to count as y in context C. They, for example, determine when a movement of an object counts as a legal knight move in the game of chess or under which institutional conditions Obama counts as the president of the United States. Rules of this kind make up the structure of institutional social reality.

Searle maintains that all status functions are created by speech acts (oral or written) of a special type which he calls "declarations". These speech acts "change the world by declaring that a state of affairs exists and thus bringing that state of affairs into existence" (13). Declarations, i.e. linguistic acts representing special intentional states, create status functions, and thus language assumes a central role in the construction of social institutions.[1] Declarations

[1] When we distinguish between language and speech (as Searle does not), it would be more ap-

bring about all of social institutional reality (with the exception of language itself). Prelinguistic intentional states cannot do this (69). According to Searle, this circumstance guarantees that status functions carry "deontic powers", that is rights, duties, obligations and so on. Searle thinks that language (for example the use of declarations) necessarily involves social commitments. The alleged necessity of these commitments derives from the social character of the communication situation, the conventional character of the expression devices and the intentionality of speakers' meaning (80). Social commitment is insolubly tied to the performance of speech acts: an assertion commits the speaker to its truth, a promise commits its maker to keeping the promise.

Searle now claims that his analysis of institutional reality helps to elucidate important philosophical problems of the freedom of the will, of human rationality, of power and of human rights. He assumes that there are two types of reasons for action, desire-based reasons and desire-independent reasons. Desire-independent reasons are commitments, obligations, rights and so on. They are reasons for an action even if there is no desire for that action: "it is a peculiarity of human beings that they have the capacity to create and act on desire-independent reasons for action" (127/8). Desire-independent reasons can ground a desire and cause it, even though this is logically not inevitable nor always the case. Reasons, according to Searle, normally do not constitute the causally sufficient condition for our decisions and actions. In this sense, there is an "experienced causal gap" between causes of actions and actions. Reasons lead to an inclination to execute a decision, they do not force it. In the philosophical tradition, this gap was called 'freedom of the will'. Without our conscious experience of this gap, that is without freedom of will, institutional facts are meaningless. The institutional structure provides desire-independent reasons for action. The recognition of the deontic character of institutions amounts to the recognition of desire-independent reasons for action.

Searle tries to account for social institutional reality and for human rationality in terms of the concept of power, using an analysis of the concept of power which is very similar to Max Weber's. He distinguishes between general deontic power exercised by the performance of speech acts, power as social pressure ("background power"), and political power which is connected with the permanent threat of physical force. Deontic power also has to do with rights, as rights always imply obligations. Searle extends his discussion to universal human rights, and points out that their justification cannot be ethically neutral.

In the short concluding chapter (200–202) Searle poses the question of the possible relevance of his ontological account for research in the social sciences. Surprisingly frank, he concedes: "I guess the short answer is that I don't really know" (200). Not quite consistent with this admission is when he adds somewhat later that the knowledge of the basic ontology of a discipline deepens the understanding of issues in this discipline, implying that the knowledge of social ontology deepens the understanding of social sciences. He substantiates

propriate to say that speech creates status functions and with it institutional reality. Such a distinction between language and speech could, I think, clarify many of Searle's claims.

this statement with, amongst others, the following considerations: (1) It would be a mistake to treat money or other social institutions as if they were natural phenomena like those studied in the natural sciences. They should rather be regarded as products of massive, socially shared fantasy. Institutions disintegrate when people lose confidence in them. (2) All diverse human institutions have a common structure: repeated applications of specific linguistic representations (especially of declarations) distribute "deontic powers". Therefore different branches of the social sciences, such as sociology and economics, should not be viewed as if they dealt with fundamentally different subject matters. The theses of the fragile nature of institutional social reality and of the unity of the social sciences, however, do not seem to be closely connected to social ontology. They have, in fact, been brought forward by others without an appeal to ontological claims. So it does not appear that social ontology necessarily contributes to a deeper understanding of the social sciences.

This often quite repetitive book has as its main aim reconstructing and reformulating philosophical concepts and problems within an ontology of social institutions. It does not address the epistemological status of the social ontology proposed. So this book does not try to answer questions such as: What kind of knowledge can be provided by social ontology? What is the relation between social ontology and research in the social sciences? I think the lack of discussion of these questions constitutes the fundamental flaw of this book. Social ontology seems to be an empty exercise if it cannot be fruitfully related to problems of the social sciences. Furthermore, the adequacy of Searle's reconstruction of the philosophical problems itself hinges on the answers to these questions. For how can Searle's reconstruction of the problems of freedom of will, human rationality, power and human rights be assessed if the epistemological status of Searles social ontology is left open? I will briefly discuss how Searle deals with the questions of the status of social ontology and of its relation to the social sciences.

What kind of knowledge can be provided by social ontology? As already remarked, the social ontology of Searle consists of the description of the structure of social institutions. Such structural descriptions, according to Searle at another place,[2] are not empirical hypotheses, but have conceptual nature. They analyze concepts in an a priori fashion, they are no ordinary empirical anthropological generalizations. A conceptual analysis, Searle thinks, has not only conceptual significance, but also some empirical import: The structures exhibited in the conceptual analysis can be confronted with our intuitions about institutional structures of a specific society. It can, however, not be tested by confronting consequences of the analysis with observable facts. Searle assumes that institutional reality possesses a conceptual or even "logical" structure (6), accessible to conceptual analysis. But there are at least three objections to this assumption. First, according to it there is a priori knowledge about society, immune to revision and empirical falsification. This is very questionable. Furthermore, Searle's assumption amounts to the separation of reality in two realms, one realm of re-

[2] Searle made some remarks on this subject in Searle 2004.

ality being accessible to conceptual analysis and one realm of facts accessible by the methods of the empirical sciences. It leads to an ontological dualism which Searle justly tries to avoid in favour for an ontological monism (3–4). Third, Searle's assumption is an obstacle to the further development of one of the most promising ideas in the book, namely that language plays a central role in the creation of social institutions. This idea can be elaborated only by detailed empirical comparisons with prelinguistic communication systems, not with a priori considerations about the structure of language.

What are the tasks of research in the social sciences and how are they related to the tasks of social ontology? Research in the social sciences deals with the question which norms or rules are accepted (or valid) in certain social formations, social ontology consists of an analysis of the "deontic powers" of status functions. How does the empirical ascertainment of the validity of norms or rules in a society differ from the descriptions of status functions given by social ontology? Research in the social sciences is concerned with structural descriptions of various social formations, social ontology deals with the description and analysis of social structure. How do social scientific descriptions of structures differ from those offered by social ontology? Searle does not attempt to answer these questions nor does he show any awareness that answers to these questions are of crucial importance for his enterprise of a monistic and naturalistic account of social reality.

I conclude: The relation of social ontology to the social sciences appears to be a subject matter which Searle has not considered in a serious way. And Searle's view of the epistemological status of social ontology seems to be inadequate. Searle's book does contain some interesting ideas on the contribution of linguistic communication (by way of declarations) to social structure. Nevertheless, given that he considers them to be of merely conceptual nature, Searle cannot connect them to biological and social-psychological research. And given his disattention to problems of the social sciences, he does not succeed in applying these ideas to empirical problems of explaining social structure and its evolution. Therefore, I think that Searle's book will disappoint anyone who wants to know more about the relevance of social ontology for the empirical sciences.

References

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