# The Construction of Social Reality.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality.*
New York: Free Press, 1995. Pp. xiii+241. $25.00 (cloth).

This book was written to solve what Searle describes as a philosophical puzzle about the nature of social reality. It is a virtue of the book that he states the puzzle in question with unusual exactness. Searle makes it relatively easy to judge for yourself how much is accomplished in his attempt to solve it.

The puzzle is set up by reflecting on an ontology of facts. Searle understands facts to be the "conditions in the world that satisfy the truth conditions expressed by statements" (p. 211). Facts come in degrees of fundamentality, the most fundamental are physical. He repeatedly insists that "the world consists entirely of entities that we find it convenient, though not entirely accurate, to describe as particles. These particles exist in fields of force, and are organized into systems" (p. 6). There are mental facts that serve to satisfy the truth conditions of statements about consciousness and intentionality, but these facts are "structures" of the fundamental physical facts. Searle thinks that having this conception of "our" reality is part of being an educated person (p. 6), so he is not prepared to justify it positively, but a considerable portion of the book is devoted to defending it against some popular alternatives—bizarrely popular from Searle's point of view.

Searle's puzzle, then, is how to understand the objective existence of institutional facts given an ontology of brute physical facts and "structures" of brute facts such as intentional facts. A familiar example of an objective institutional fact is that some bits of paper are money. At least part of what Searle finds puzzling here is that institutional facts are facts only because people generally believe certain things, but it is characteristic of subjective facts to be so because they are believed to be so. How then can institutional facts be objective instead of subjective? Another puzzling aspect of institutional facts is that they are fabulously complex structures of physical facts, and these physical facts are themselves phenomenologically complex. Institutional facts can, however, be phenomenologically simple despite their ontological complexity. Consider, for example, the fact that Jacques is Searle's waiter. These considerations contribute to "our sense that there is an element of magic, a conjuring trick, a sleight of hand in the creation of institutional facts out of brute facts" (p. 45). We want to see "the connection between the fundamental ontology of conscious biological beasts like ourselves and the apparatus of social facts and human institutions" (p. 29).

Searle's solution can be seen as progressing in steps. The first step involves recognizing collective intentionality. If Searle intends to block the defensive end in a game of football, this intention is "derived from" the collective intentionality of Searle, the defensive end, and the other players to be playing a

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game of football (p. 23). Collective intentionality is "primitive" in the sense that it is not explicitly analyzable into individual, first personal intentionality and other elements. (This is not to say, however, that the fact of some collective intention is not a "structure" of more basic facts.) Searle's second step is a characterization of what he calls constitutive rules. These take the form: X counts as Y in context C. An example is, "Bills issued by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (X) count as money (Y) in the United States (C)" (p. 28). Constitutive rules are important because institutional, social facts exist only within a system of constitutive rules. Here, and elsewhere, Searle is building on his earlier work (for example, *Intentionality* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983]).

To say that X counts as Y in C is to say that Y-ness is imposed on X by collective acceptance. Searle continues by suggesting that this imposition has the structure: we accept that S has the power to do A. Or to abbreviate: we accept (S has the power [S does A]). So, "X, this piece of paper, counts as Y, a five dollar bill" gets analyzed into:

> We accept (S, the bearer of X, is enabled [S buys with X up to the value of five dollars]) (p. 105).

This formula is meant to be quite general; Searle argues that different types of institutional facts are thus all instances of the conferral or removal of powers. Powers can take the form of positive enabling conditions or negative requirements.

Once the structure of institutional facts is laid out, the last big step in Searle's project becomes the explanation of how facts with these structures are created and maintained. Since the rules that constitute them are often not explicitly codified and published, one naturally wonders how the human behaviors and dispositions that ultimately result in institutional facts come about. Many have been tempted to theorize that the rules figure into the causation of the behaviors even though this means that the rule following must be unconscious. Searle rejects this kind of theorizing and offers an alternative. He relies on the notion of "background" capacities, which will be familiar to readers of his earlier books. Searle characterizes the background as the preintentional set of neurophysiological conditions that gives rise to conscious, or potentially conscious, intentionality.

The background thus figures causally in the production of behavior. The background, furthermore, is "sensitive" to constitutive rules even though it is preintentional and does not involve representations of the rules. The rules, therefore, are part of the explanation of behavior because of their role in the background. But how can the rules that constitute social reality sensitize the background if they are not typically conscious and are never unconsciously internally represented? A version of evolutionary explanation comes to the rescue. We have evolved some of the particular mechanisms in the background partly because they conform to the constitutive rules. It is unclear how literally Searle understands the evolutionary metaphor here. He compares his account with simple biological cases (fishes evolving good shapes for swimming), but particular features of the background are obviously not universal to the species. So his real point seems to be simply that a full theory of social reality must involve a component of diachronic explanation; it would be better to

stick with a word like 'develop' instead of 'evolve'. Individuals acquire or develop the background dispositions they have because these are the dispositions to behave in accordance with the rules.

In broad outline, Searle's final picture is a familiar one. Social facts are analyzed (though not entirely without residue) into intentional facts about individuals. Perhaps the main feature distinguishing his account from others of its ilk is that intentional facts about individuals are not restricted to first personal intentions. The crucial notion of collective intentionality arises from individuals' irreducibly having what Searle calls "we intentions." Searle's analysis also has important implications for social science. Individualistic theories such as the parts of economics that depend on rational choice theory, and other disciplines infected by this kind of theorizing, will not describe social reality with accuracy. The appropriate descriptive vocabulary for social reality includes "we intentions," and as Searle describes them they are quite opaque to formalizations of optimization.

The book's last chapters consist of "philosophical housekeeping" intended to clean up some messes that others have made concerning truth and realism. This expository structure is somewhat awkward. Searle's main argument, indeed the statement of his puzzle, is couched in an ontology of fundamental physical facts and structures of these facts. In other words, the argument is intended to make sense within the framework of realism and the correspondence theory of truth. Searle regards this as both commonsensical and an "essential presupposition of any sane philosophy" (p. xiii), but he is aware that some suppose there are other ways of doing sane philosophy. The book was, accordingly, originally conceived with an initial chapter devoted to the defense of these specimens of common sense. But Putnam, Davidson, Derrida, and a host of others turn out to be so badly confused that the projected chapter grew into three, which occupy a third of the book. Since the book is not supposed to be about realism, Searle moved these chapters which defend it to the back of the book. For the most part, they literally constitute "defense" against specific attacks because there is little point in arguing positively for what one takes to be common sense.

Searle's housekeeping denouement will not sway anyone who already regards External Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth as outmoded doctrines. There might, however, be some readers who share his initial puzzlement about social reality and are attracted to his resolution of the puzzles, but fearful that the whole thing might be shot down by a little antirealist sharpshooting. The last three chapters probably do enough to allay such fears.

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