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# SOCIAL ONTOLOGY AND IMMANENT REALISM

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## abstract

*What are the intentional objects of groups' beliefs? This paper claims that they are immanent facts, i.e., facts which exist only within groups' minds. Since in relevant literature the notion of immanent object and the related theory of "immanent realism" arise in connection with the work of Franz Brentano, the paper begins by briefly sharing historical information on Brentano, making clear why – contrary to common belief – Brentano did not argue for immanent realism in his work. In a second part, I then look more closely at groups' beliefs and illustrate why the insight of immanent realism – despite its historically inadequate reconstruction – can bear on my initial question. In doing so, I pay particular attention to John Searle's theory of institutional facts, using it as a conceptual basis to develop my own pseudo-Brentanian approach. This approach allows me to introduce a further class of social entities in the last part of the paper: contrary to institutional facts the immanent entities of collective beliefs presuppose neither the assignment of functions nor the generation of deontologies, but they do presuppose groups' beliefs for their existence. Being the precipitates of collective experiences, such entities are intrinsically related with the first plural person perspective and hence play an important role in what we may call the "cultural layer" of social reality.*

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## keywords

*Social facts, immanent facts, cultural reality, social ontology, immanent realism*

*“[...] Dornröschen und Rotkäppchen sind Gestalten der deutschen Märchenwelt, die zur gemeinsamen Umwelt unseres Volkes gehört. Keinem von uns wird es einfallen zu behaupten, daß jeder sein eigenes Dornröschen habe. Es hat seine fest umrissenen Züge, seine persönliche Eigenart und Schicksale, an denen so wenig zu rütteln ist wie an denen einer historischen Persönlichkeit. Wir würden sehr energisch Verwahrung einlegen, wenn ihm jemand Züge andichten wollte, die ihm nicht zugehören. Unsere Märchenwelt nun hat eine gewisse Topyk, eine Eigenart, die sie von der anderer Völker, z.B. der chinesischen, charakteristisch unterscheidet.”*  
(Stein 1922, 134-135)

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I am mainly interested in the ontological status that the intentional objects of groups' beliefs bear. Suppose that I am a member of, e.g., a religious community and that I share with the members of this community the belief that, e.g., only someone with divine powers can be the leader of the community. In this scenario, what does it mean for a collective to share this belief? What is the object of the belief? On the one hand, the belief is false simply because nothing in the world makes it true. On the other hand, the non-existing fact that the leader has divine powers – if believed – produces some effects, e.g., the community respects him and/or only he has the right to perform given actions within the community.

One of the assumptions that drives my argumentation is that within social ontology there is a distinction to be drawn between sociality and culturality. Sociality comprehends all those entities, practices and dynamics which are intrinsically social and which are not culturally modifiable. In this sense, social notions like sincerity, victory, obligations, etc., seem to fall within the domain of sociality: they are not context-relative (see Smith 2003) or do not bear “essential properties” (as phenomenologists would prefer to say, see Salice 2012). On the contrary, culturality comprehends all those social entities which are intrinsic to a given culture and hence cannot exist outside or apart from this culture. In accordance with this idea, here I will claim that the objects of social and cultural beliefs belong to an ontological category of its own kind, i.e., they are the “immanent objects” of social beliefs, and that these objects partly constitute the domain of culturality.

## 2. Franz Brentano and Immanent Realism

The present article is organized as follows: since the notion of immanent object and the related theory of “immanent realism” arise in relevant literature in connection with the work of Franz Brentano, I begin (§1) by

briefly sharing relevant historical information on Brentano, making clear why – contrary to common belief – Brentano did *not* argue for immanent realism in his work. In a second part (§3), I then look more closely at cultural beliefs and illustrate why the insight of immanent realism – despite its historically inadequate reconstruction – can bear on issues related to the main question raised above: what are the objects of collective beliefs? In doing so, I pay particular attention to John Searle’s theory of social construction, using it as a conceptual basis to develop my own *pseudo*-Brentanian approach to cultural reality (§4).

The literature has employed the phrase “immanent realism” to characterize to characterize a phase in Brentano’s thought which more or less corresponds to the period in which Brentano published his groundbreaking monograph *Psychology from Empirical Standpoint* (1864). Among other merits, in this book Brentano reactivates the Aristotelian-medieval notion of intentionality and puts it at the center of philosophical debates. According to Roderick Chisholm and a number of other commentators, the intentionality thesis – as Brentano introduces it in that book – strictly taken entails *two* different theses. The first is a psychological thesis which states that reference to an object is the distinguishing element between psychic and physical phenomena. All psychic phenomena, and psychic phenomena alone, are *directed* towards something. The second is an *ontological* thesis which concerns “the nature of certain objects of thought and of other psychological attitudes”, i.e., it concerns the ontological status of that “something” to which the mind is related (see Chisholm 1967, 201).

According to this second thesis, for Brentano the object of an intentional act is an ontologically subjective entity which exists *only in the mind*. Brentano allegedly reached this insight when attempting to offer a solution to the problem raised by the so-called “objectless presentations”. Indeed, immanent realism can easily account for all those cases in which an act is directed towards a non-existing entity: the act of thinking of Pegasus shows no structural difference from the act of thinking of Barack Obama – in both cases the act of thinking is directed towards an object existing merely *in the mind*. With regard to the latter, however, it happens to be the case that this inner object corresponds to an actually existing object.

Recently, convincing evidence has been delivered that Brentano did *not* claim such a position. Scholars have presented several arguments to show that Brentano never accepted immanent realism (see Antonelli 2012, Sauer 2006). Among the reasons adduced by these authors, probably the most

important is that Brentano's position did not share the modern view of relations as  $n$ -place predicates or properties. *If* the intentional relation were a dyadic property, *then* the inference from the existence of the relation to the existence of its relata was indeed justified. However, Brentano denies that the intentional relation has to be analyzed in terms of a dyadic relation into which the subject *and* the object enter, and so he was not committed to the idea that all intentional acts have an object of a *sui generis* ontological status. In other words, for Brentano, it does not follow that if *a* thinks of *b*, then *both* relata, *a* and *b*, exist in whatever sense of the term "existence".

Rather, Brentano understood relations in an Aristotelian sense, namely as monadic predicates. Accordingly, the fact that I think of Obama, is not constituted by my mind, the relation of thinking and Obama as object existing in the mind. This fact only includes my mind *and* the monadic property thinking-of-Obama and it obtains regardless of whether Obama exists or not (i.e., it does not entail the *existence* of an object in *my* mind). To put this point in Brentanian terms, I think of Obama and not of the thought-Obama, I hear the sound and not the heard-sound, I see the object and not the seen-object, etc. Obama, the sound, the object, etc., can be called – and are actually called by Brentano – the "immanent" objects of the act, but it should now be evident that this expression does *not* imply that these objects are *in* the consciousness.

To be sure, Brentano reserves an ontological *niche* to what he calls the act's "correlates" (German: *Korrelate*) – that is, the aforementioned thought-Obama, heard-sound, seen-object etc. Such correlates are indeed parts of my mind, but they are *not* the objects of the act. But if so, then in what sense are these correlates *in* my mind? A clear answer to this question can be found in Brentano's lectures on *Descriptive Psychology* given in Vienna during the 1880s and 1890s (see Brentano 1982). In these lectures Brentano reinforces a statement he already made in his *Psychologie* that all acts are conscious acts. Not only are all acts directed towards an object, they are also directed towards themselves. Insofar as they occur, they simultaneously grasp themselves and hence are conscious. Suppose I am thinking of Obama, then at the same time I know that I am thinking of Obama. And the same is valid for all intentional acts: if I perceive or imagine Obama, I know that I perceive or imagine Obama. Looking now at this *second* intentional relation in which the act grasps itself, the act encounters, on the one hand, the act's component or mode (I know whether I am merely *imagining* Obama or if I *perceive* him, etc.). But, on the other, it also encounters Obama-*qua*-object

of this act, that is, it also grasps the thought-Obama or the perceived-Obama. So the correlate does indeed play a role in Brentano's theory of intentionality, but only a secondary one, as it were.

But if Brentano did not advocate immanent realism, then questions arise as to why it is important to deal systematically with this theory and why it is relevant for social ontology. What follows should hopefully clarify the answers to both questions. In short, the idea is that the beliefs of individuals cannot create reality. It does not follow from the fact that individuals take something to be true, that this something has to exist in any sense. The same does not hold, however, for group beliefs. If a group believes something, then what the group believes does exist in a perspicuous sense. Of course, this reality is not that of brute facts; rather, what the group creates is a social or – probably more precisely – a cultural reality, and this is a reality which exists only *in* the group's mind.

### 3. Social Ontology and Immanent Realism

To illustrate this intuition, consider the following declarative sentence and assume that it expresses a belief:

(1) Akihito is the emperor of Japan

The sentence refers to a fact (an existing state of affairs) and, hence, it is true. But what is its truth-maker? To answer this question, one might do well to distinguish between external and internal points of view, depending on who holds the belief expressed in the sentence.

Following Searle's account (see Searle 1995, 2010), the sentence is true because it refers to an *institutional* fact. This is not an ontologically objective fact (such as the one that Mont Blanc is 4810m high), but an ontologically subjective one. If mankind were to disappear, then nations, emperors and, more generally, all institutional facts would disappear too. On the contrary, Mont Blanc would still remain.

What is then the structure of this institutional fact? What, in other words, are its constituents? First of all, sentence (1) suggests that the property being-emperor-of-Japan is exemplified by an individual, i.e., by Akihito. But this suggestion is false, for exemplification is an objective relation which characterizes objective facts, whereas the fact at issue is ontologically subjective. According to this analysis, (1) does not linguistically depict the state of affairs at issue adequately and hence has to be reformulated in the following way:

## (1\*) Akihito counts as the emperor of Japan

The “counting as” locution should convey the idea that Akihito is merely *held* as the emperor of Japan by someone. Still, the question now arises as to what kind of predicate the “counting as” locution expresses. In particular, is this a dyadic predicate (see Varzi 2007)? (Interestingly enough, here we come across a problem similar to that we discussed regarding Brentano’s theory of intentionality.) If the “counting as” is a dyadic predicate and if sentence (1\*) is true, then it would follow that two objects exist: on the one hand, Akihito and, on the other, the emperor of Japan.

But this view is not compatible with Searle’s monist ontology. As he puts it regarding his preferred example of a 10 dollar bill: it is not the case that when I hold a 10 dollar bill in my hand, I hold two objects at the same time – the piece of paper and the dollar bill. One possibility to deal with this difficulty is to go for the idea that the “counting as” predicate is not primitive and has to be analyzed further. If *x* counts as *y*, then a given *status* – that is, a given *label* – is assigned by collective intentionality to *x* by means of an expressed or unexpressed speech act of declaration. The status or label is the *y*-term, and this status always goes with a certain function<sup>1</sup>. Returning to the setting of our initial example, in Japan, if you are the the *Tennō*, you can fulfill certain functions that go with this status; for example, you are in charge for the convocation of the Diet. Since all status goes hand in hand with functions, Searle introduces the concept of “status function” to refer to all those functions which can be fulfilled only in relation to a given status. As a consequence, the fact at hand consists of the status function “emperor” imposed on an individual (i.e., Akihito) via collective intentionality.

There are two further necessary conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for this fact to exist. The first are the deontologies generated by the status function. As Searle puts it: “status functions = intentional facts → deontologies” (Searle 2010, 23). The emperor has the right to adjourn the convocation of the Diet, but he also has the obligation to perform ceremonial functions. Without such deontologies, i.e., without the rights and obligations connected with the status, there are no institutional facts.

1 But in some cases you only have the label without the corresponding *x*: in 2010 Searle extends the domain of the notion of institutional fact by including the so-called “free-standing *y*-terms” (i.e., facts constituted only by a status function; e.g., corporations, electronic money, blindfold chess, etc.). Accordingly, the validity of the “*x* counts as *y*”-formula is now restricted to a limited number of institutional facts.

The second condition has to do with the beliefs that the group entertains. If the *creation* of this fact goes back to the imposition of a status to the *x*-term by means of a declaration, its “continued existence” is secured only if a group *G* (for example, for argument’s sake, the Shinto community in Japan<sup>2</sup>) believes or accepts that Akihito is the emperor of Japan (Searle 1995, 117f). Here, again, if *G* does not believe/accept that Akihito is the emperor of Japan, the institutional fact at issue does not exist.

We have now found an answer to our initial question: to what state of affairs does the belief expressed by sentence (1) refer? The answer is: the belief is directed towards a complex entity (a status function assigned to an individual via collective intentionality) which exists only as long as the two aforementioned conditions are fulfilled. Since this state of affairs subsists, sentence (1) is true. Note, however, that the sentence analyzed so far expresses the belief of an *external* observer and that the state of affairs at hand is the intentional object of this particular belief. To make this clear, let’s have a look at the second necessary condition, namely, at the group’s beliefs.

What about the belief of group *G*? To what fact does sentence (1) refer, if this sentence is taken to express the belief of *G*? When *G* believes that Akihito is the emperor, *G* believes that Akihito has a divine nature. Since for *G* being-the-*Tennō* is co-referential with the property being an individual with divine nature (the senses of these predicates differ, but their objectual domain coincide), for *G* sentence (1) refers to the very same state of affairs as sentence (2):

(2) Akihito has divine nature

In other words, for *G*, “emperor” does not point primarily to a status function, but to a non-institutional concept. Hence, the belief of *G* and that of the external observer are *not* directed towards the same state of affairs. For the external observer defines the concept “emperor” only in terms of deontic powers and deontologies (see “[...] the [status] function is defined in terms of [deontic] power [...]”, Searle 1997, 451), whereas *G* defines this concept by virtue of properties which are taken to be objective. For *G*, to be the descendant of the Gods is not a socially construed fact: rather, the emperor is held to be the lineal descendent of the Gods by means of natural kinship (see Maraini 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Only sociological research can ascertain whether or not there is a Shinto community in Japan which bears such belief, so this example may very well be fictional. Still, this does not seem to be relevant for the conceptual consequences to be drawn from it.

Thus, the object of G's belief is *not* an institutional, i.e., a socially construed, fact: the group does not believe that (1) is true by means of social agreement. Furthermore – under the plausible assumption that no man has divine nature – there is also no objective state of affairs to which G's belief refers.

According to this last point, if we take (1) to express G's belief, (1) is *false*. Still, this belief contributes to the constitution of an institutional fact. Let me stress at this point that it is not the belief as such that brings about the institutional fact, but this very *particular* belief, namely the belief *in* the fact that Akihito has divine nature. (The group may have thousands of other beliefs about Akihito, but only if it believes that Akihito has divine nature, is Akihito the emperor of Japan.) Accordingly, the sentence

(3) G believes that Akihito has divine nature

has to be in any case *true* for the corresponding institutional fact (expressed by (1\*)) to exist. In other words, if sentence (3) were false (if G does not believe that Akihito has divine nature), then sentence (1\*) would be false, too. To be sure, one could try to get rid of the linguistic reference to the non-existing fact enclosed in (3) by applying some sort of paraphrastic strategy. Following Russell's suggestion, (3) could be paraphrased into:

(3\*) There exists an  $x$  such that (i) G has a belief about  $x$ , (ii)  $x$  has divine nature and (iii) there is only one such  $x$

But since  $x$  has no values, sentence (3\*) is obviously false. Here I am not concerned with those cases in which *individuals* instead of collectives are mentioned in clause (i): it may very well be that the paraphrase works for *this* kind of case. Still, in the scenario at issue (3\*) cannot be an adequate paraphrase of (3) since, as Searle points out, (3) captures a necessary condition for the existence of the corresponding institutional fact. Indeed institutional facts exist only in virtue of the beliefs of a community. But then, if (3) has to be true, what does G believe, when it believes that Akihito is the emperor?

#### 4. Immanent Entities and the Cultural Layer of Social Reality

As suggested earlier in the paper, I contend that the object of G's belief is a fact which (subjectively) exists only as long as the corresponding experience exists. This entity exists in the group's mind and nowhere else and can be characterized as "immanent" in a *pseudo*-Brentanian terminology. Just as *Dornröschen* and *Rotkäppchen* have their own reality (their "definitely



contoured traits [*seine fest umrissenen Züge*]”), but these figures existentially depend on the experiences of a group and *not* of that of an individual (in this case: on the fantasies of the German *Volk*), so the divine emperor of Japan (or more precisely: the fact that someone *is* the divine emperor of Japan) exists only in relation to the beliefs of a group.

This idea leads to an important consequence. Remember that immanent realism holds that immanent entities may or may not correspond to transcendent entities and that this does not make any structural difference for the belief of the individual. This idea can now be exploited in the case of group beliefs: immanent entities can correspond to transcendent (institutional or natural) entities, but this does not make any difference for the group’s experience. Nothing in the experience varies if its object does or does not exist. Let’s discuss this point a bit further.

We have already dealt with the scenario in which the group believes that being-the-emperor and having-divine-nature are natural properties of Akihito. Here the immanent fact does not correspond to an objective or natural fact – for no such facts exist at all. But it does not *correspond* to an institutional fact either: although the institutional fact (subjectively) exists and although the immanent fact (together with the concomitant belief) is a necessary condition for its existence, G’s belief is *not* concerned with this institutional fact. For what G intends, when it intends that Akihito is the emperor, is not what an external observer intends, when s/he intends that Akihito counts as the emperor. As we saw, sentence (1) is true if it expresses the belief of an external observer, but it is *false* if it expresses the belief of G.

So now one can modify this scenario by assuming that there is a group of social scientists (G’) and that G’ agrees with Searle’s theory. Assume furthermore that G’ knows that “emperor” is a status function and that it assigns this status function to Searle himself. In this example it happens to be the case that the immanent fact believed by G’ *corresponds* to an institutional fact. In other words, the fact believed by G’ corresponds to a given segment of institutional reality. As a consequence, the sentence

(4) Searle is the emperor

is true if we take it to express either the belief of an external observer *or* the belief of G’. Still, the immanent and the institutional facts at issue are and remain ontologically different. This last point also tells us that the existence

of a transcendent fact (be it institutional or objective/natural<sup>3</sup>) does not make any structural difference for the belief of the group and that the group can be acquainted only with immanent entities. At this juncture, the central question raises as to how the term “belief” is employed here and whether the beliefs of individuals have the same features of group beliefs. I would answer this second question in the negative, i.e., beliefs of individuals *can* be acquainted with transcendent entities, but a discussion of this aspect would exceed the scope and purpose of this paper.

To conclude: in addition to institutional facts, in this paper I claimed that there is a further class of social entities which presuppose neither the assignment of functions nor the generation of deontologies, but which do presuppose collective beliefs (or group beliefs) for their existence. As these are merely the ontological precipitates of intentional experiences, as it were, such entities taken *per se* are not causally active. Only together with their corresponding beliefs do these facts have social effects. Being so intrinsically related with the first person plural perspective, they play an important role in what we may call the “cultural layer” of social reality. And indeed they constitute – at least an important domain of – this layer. To repeat the intuition that lead this analysis, we can say that the beliefs of individuals cannot create reality, but that of groups can. However, rigid ontological limits have to be set here as the only entities that these beliefs may create are “immanent” entities, i.e., entities which exist only in the group mind.

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3 Obviously enough, the scenario at hand can be again modified by taking natural facts into account. If G believes that there is snow on the Mont Blanc, the immanent object of this belief corresponds to a natural fact if there actually is snow on the Mont Blanc.

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