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The Construction of Social Reality

By John R. Searle. New York: The Free Press, 1995.
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Social scientists know John R. Searle largely for his speech act theory. Following Wittgenstein's fundamental insight that words do not picture anything and J. L. Austin's subsequent work on what words do, Searle managed to define an exhaustive set of five speech acts. These were to become the backbone of much research into interpersonal communication. Searle achieved this feat by reducing human communication to individual actions, leaving out the people who engaged such actions as well as the dialogical processes by which speech acquires the meanings Searle theorized.

In his latest book, one could say, he did it again - but this time to a far more complex area of human being: *social reality*. Like a magician, Searle makes things appear simply by abstracting a few elements from the complex fabric of social life and presenting a logical and hence partial analysis of these. His book is well written, avoids technical jargon, and gives plausible examples. Regrettably, it ends with a defense of Searle's branch of realism, dismissing his opponents with a few simple arguments, as if his construction of social reality was a mere side product en route to this defense.

Let me walk you through some of Searle's carefully developed distinctions.

Chapter One presents what he calls *building blocks*. Architectural metaphors are appropriate for Searle as he builds logical concepts upon logical concepts - ultimately on a realist foundations. From an analysis of what typically happens in a restaurant, Searle concludes that social reality is *weightless* and *invisible* and not reducible to physics (although visible facts undoubtedly are involved). To Searle, social reality is also *observer-relative*, that is, it cannot exist without human participation. His counter example is Mt. Everest whose existence, he claims, does in no way depend on the existence of humans. Most consequential is Searle's claim that social reality *serves assigned functions*. The function of a screw driver, he argues, is not intrinsic to its materiality, but assigned by someone. To capture this idea, and on his preferred level of generality, he provides us with the formula "*X counts as Y in the context of C*" and frames most of his conceptualizations in these terms. Accordingly, not only does that flat-ended stem with a handle count as a screw driver in the context of screws in need of fastening or loosening, but so does Bill Clinton count as US President in such context as signing a bill into law or giving a State of the Union address. Moreover, objects can become representations by virtue of being assigned the function of standing for something

other than themselves. This formula seems to do it all!

For Searle, social reality also involves *collective intentionality*. Whereas the application of a screw driver does not require anyone's consent, the signing of a bill into law, and the use of traffic signs are predicated on the collaboration by many. Collective intentionality starts with conventions. Two people walking hand in hand on a beach create what Searle calls a *social fact*. But Searle's central concern is that sub-class of social facts which involve human institutions. Money, for example, but also property, marriages, or governments are said to be *institutional facts* and part of what he calls *institutional reality*.

In Chapter Two, Searle elaborates upon this notion. He observes that many institutional facts are *self-referential* in the sense that we cannot apply the concept, say, of money, to something without acknowledging that this something is the kind of stuff that people think money is. If everybody stops believing it to be money, it ceases to function as money. He also observes *systematic relationships among institutional facts*. For example, marriage presupposes an understanding of contracts which in turn presupposes some understanding of promises and obligations. Indeed, one could argue, much of what social scientists do is to explore such relationships systematically. Searle also notes that institutional facts reside in actions, not objects. He illustrates this by pointing out that money functions by being exchanged for goods, services, statuses, and the like. Institutional facts, he says, are predominantly *processes not products*. Studying a dollar bill as an object the way a natural scientist would, can hardly reveal what money is for us. Social objects such as governments, families, property, and money are at best place *holders for patterns of activities*, not things.

As expected, Searle relies heavily on the role of *language* in explaining the constitution of institutional reality, particularly in Chapter Three. Besides the already mentioned self-referentiality, many institutional facts are *brought into existence by declarations*, like "I appoint you to this position," or "war is hereby declared". The indispensability of language in the constitution and maintenance of institutional facts is also claimed by social constructionists, of course. But quite unlike them, Searle's conception of language as *symbolic* or *representational*, as *public,* and as based on *conventions*, all of which make it a social fact and part of the complex relations that make up social reality. His representational conception of language is seen in his fundamental belief that *brute facts are logically prior to institutional facts* to which I will say more below. He also introduces an important distinction between two kinds of rules. Whereas *regulative rules* apply to already existing facts, driving automobiles for example, *constitutive rules* are creative of Y out of already existing Xs (in C). To illustrate, criminal law is regulative, but it renders certain individuals as criminals when appropriate conditions are met.

With this conceptual apparatus in place, Chapters Four and Five address *the general theory*. Here, Searle proposes a *hierarchy* from brute to institutional facts by simply *iterating* the formula "X counts as Y in C". These chapters explore the source of social power in collectively accepting certain regulative rules, the assignment of rights and privileges to individuals, the imposition of status functions, procedural steps on the way to power and honor, etc. In Chapter Five Searle raises three questions that social scientists might want to make their own. How are institutional facts *created*? How do they continue to *exist*? And how are they *represented*? Regarding their creation Searle quite naturally returns to speech acts such as the Declaration of Independence. Regarding their continued existence, he discusses

failures, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Los Angeles riots. Regarding their representation he points to official status bearers, signatures of people, uniforms, or rituals. This notion of representation presents a new twist on the worn out idea of mapping.

To me, the most important shift Searle introduces in his book is found in Chapter Six. Here, he begins to tackle what is absent in his otherwise very logical constructions: that people may not be aware of all the features of the social realities they enact, that they take their participation in them for granted, or, to say it even stronger than he would, that *background* preconditions institutions to work. This would consign Searle's analysis to being only a part, perhaps the less significant part, of his story. More than in other chapters, here Searle draws on the works of others: Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, Hume, and Nietzsche (suspiciously absent from this list are such anti-foundationalists Heidegger and Gadamer, and recent writers Maturana and Varela) all of whom struggle to come to grips with preconscious being, intuitions, predispositions, readinesses, tacit knowledge (Polyani), habitus (Bourdieu), ungrounded ways of acting (Wittgenstein), or with what a Heideggerian might call the *being-at-home-in* social institutions. Although Searle repeatedly insists on the existence of rules, even when nobody knows them (quite typical of his God's eye realism), in this chapter he does admit the possibility of people developing social behaviors that are, as he says, "functionally equivalent to following systems of rules" without actually containing representations or internalizations of those rules. Fluency in a language, for example, does not require the ability to cite the rules linguists say one uses, managing a company does not require having complete knowledge of how that company constituted. In fact, the insistence on following rules may be detrimental to competency within an institutional reality. "Being-at-home" may be far more important than "having accurate represen-

tations". Searle, who is always quick to find representations, ultimately of brute reality, finds this to be "a puzzle". I contend, background not merely contextualizes but seriously undermines many of Searle's logical constructions.

Let me explore some of my doubts in his approach.

It seems that Searle wants to join two different if not opposing conceptions of language. On the one hand, he believes *we live in a single world* totally independent of us and that the *function of language is to represent* this world. On the other hand he is a speech act theorist who realizes that language is not merely descriptive but also *constitutive of potentially many realities*. He resolves this dilemma by layering the two conceptions. Searle's frequent use of "Mt. Everest" as an example of *brute* and *observer independent facts*, may reveal the problematic of Searle's layering. Mt. Everest names the highest point of elevation *we* know. This fact is brought forth solely by virtue of the *observer-dependent* operation of comparing different points of elevation, using standard units of measurement and a way of proceeding that is established by conventions (of science). Most of us have only heard of this mountain through reports on the difficulties climbing it. Recently it has become a matter of national pride to mount an expedition and plant one's flag on its top. By all measures, Mt. Everest is observer-dependent and a thoroughly social fact. For a creature who lives millions of years, what we call Mt. Everest may be no more than a wave that comes and goes much like the nameless waves of our oceans. We can see only through our own eyes and experience only with our own body. God's eye views may exist in the stories we can tell each other but such views are not within the reach of our experiences, Searle is no exception.

Searle's conclusion that social reality is constructed hierarchically seems to be an artifact of his logic of iterating "X counts as Y in C" without, however, applying it recursively to itself. When X is said to function as Y, X is presupposed, and without function. Iterations do not define their starting point. To ascribe ultimate or brute factuality to this point is quite arbitrary and unreflectingly conventional as it were. I prefer to let this starting point be the background we simply do not know yet must accept as affording us the construction of many worlds we come to see, and learn to describe. Second-order cyberneticians have taught us that recursions do not lead to hierarchies nor require explanations of their origins but bring forth certain futures.

In distinguishing "fact stated" from "statements of facts," and insisting on the "*logical* priority of brute facts," Searle not only fails to realize that any logic is tied to a language, a written one in our case, but he also fails to acknowledge the role of speakers/writers in drawing this distinction. He seems to theorize under the illusion that reality could be observed without an observer and that statements exist without anyone making and reading them. The distinction between social and brute facts conveniently preserves this illusion. Even the natural sciences cannot exist without scientists and are institutions by Searle's definition. For me, these sciences have constituted themselves in an ontology they continually reconstruct without assuming responsibilities for their construction. Following this tradition, Searle's "facts stated" are merely stated without acknowledging their observers. Searle's posture of saying it "as it is", too, prevents him from taking responsibility for constituting the very reality he describes. It is a matter of choice to describe a world with or without observers. Descriptions are not "brute fact".

For quite some time, Searle opposed linguists and language philosophers who identified meanings with use rather than with reference. By making the assignment of functions a cornerstone of his notion of social reality, he seems to have moved towards use theories of meanings but not without giving them a distinctly rational/instrumental flavor. For social scientists, the definition of institutional realities in terms of functions has a long history and proven far too limiting. Talcott Parsons' and followers' initially enthusiastically embraced efforts to conceptualize individual actions within social systems in functional terms created many sociological theories that, 20 years later, have turned out to merely reproduce prevailing ideologies and elite conceptions. Searle's approach may suffer the same fate.

I contend, neither functional sociology nor Searle's general theory of social reality provides spaces for diversities of voices to enter and for non-instrumental social relations (moral, spiritual, or ecological ones, for example) to coexist. Except for Searle's acknowledgment of background phenomena, both theories are entirely monological (Levinas would term them egological) constructions, in sociology's case, top-down and in Searle's outside-in. Such theories are irreconcilable with accounts of society as continually reconstituted in dialogue, and as a dynamic interweaving of understandings that its constituents have of it, do enact and can also interrupt, facing each other.

Searle's book poses provocative question for social scientists to explore. It presents a new bicolage of otherwise familiar stories that can make us reconceptualize the social realities we thought we knew. While Searle's occasional admission of uncertainty as to whether he is right seems refreshingly honest, the ideal that is implicit in the admission derives from his problematic belief in a single world of brute facts. The attendant search for one *general theory* cannot do justice to the great diversity of ways people co-construct and live (in) their own.