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Concepts, facts and language – An introduction to some aspects of Searle´s theory of institutional facts

To scholars working with language John Searle is primarily known as one of the originators of the theory of speech acts which became very popular in pragmatic theories in the sixties and the seventies.

His social and philosophical theory of institutional facts have remained somewhat more in the background until the arrival of his book **The Construction of Social Reality** in 1995. In this book he return to his basic ideas and tries to develop them into a full fledged theory of social institutions.

Primarily, this is a sociological theory, but in this context I will focus attention on those aspects which I consider relevant to terminological conceptual analysis.

Searle makes an analysis of facts which exist solely in virtue of collective agreement between social agents. These facts exist simply because we believe that they exist. He points out that actions and knowledge in society are maintained solely by our collective habits and traditions.

Let us start with his crucial distinction between **brute facts** and **institutional facts**. This distinction is best illustrated by an example:

Let us say I attend a soccer football match between my favourite home team and a foreign team. I bring my dog with me. After some time both my dog and I are able to observe the fact that a ball crosses a line into a cage. But it is only me, and not my dog, who is able to observe the fact that my home team has scored a goal and leads one to nil. Consequently, when the spectators all cheer, my dog only becomes frustrated and uneasy. So, what is going on? How can we explain this?

According to Searle, the first fact (the fact that a ball crosses a line into a cage) is called a brute fact and the second fact (the fact that my home team has scored a goal) is called an institutional fact. Significantly, these two facts constitute the "same" fact from two different perspectives.

The example shows that possession of institutional facts are specific to humans, because they demand both collective intentionality and the existence of human language to exist. The institutional fact that my home team has scored a goal cannot be understood unless it is seen in relation to a structure of concepts relating to soccer football, such as: "deadline", "offside", "free kick", "penalty kick", "goal keeper", etc. All these concepts are created by institutional facts, and depend on language for their existence.

In order to capture the creation of institutional facts from brute facts, Searle establishes a simple formula:

1. X counts as Y in C

Where X is a brute fact (the passing of a ball through a line into a cage), Y is an institutional fact (scoring a goal in football), and C is the context where Y is valid (the context of soccer football). The formulation "counts as" relates to what Searle calls a constitutive rule (as opposed to regulative rules). The constitutive rule can only be operative as long as it is in harmony with a collective intentionality, i.e. the group of users of the concept, in this case the spectators and the agents involved in the play.

During the first 5 chapters of the book Searle tries to develop a general theory of the ontological aspects of social facts (of which institutional facts constitute a subtype). His basic question is: How do we construct an objective social reality? A crucial point is that it is an exclusive human ability to go from X to Y, but we can never go from Y to X, i.e. we cannot reduce an institutional fact to a brute fact, as the logical positivists believed.

Status functions

The step from X to Y in the formula 1. Above implies what Searle calls imposition of status functions. To illustrate status functions Searle uses the example of a wall, a physical barrier, between two tribal villages. This barrier constitutes the border between the tribes. In time the wall may deteriorate and finally it is only a row of stones which cannot by its sheer physical constitution prevent people from crossing it. But this does not matter if the members of the two tribes still recognize this as a border. If they collectively agree that the line of stones still constitutes the border, it will continue to exist as a barrier and people cannot cross that border if it is unacceptable. Searle's point is that the line of stones performs the same function as the physical barrier did earlier, not because of its physical constitution, but because it has been assigned a status function of being a border by collective agreement.

The ability of assigning status functions to brute facts or other institutional facts is unique to man.

Objective, subjective, epistemic and ontological facts

In order to clarify the status of his institutional facts Searle makes a clear distinction between objective facts, subjective facts, epistemic facts and ontological facts. He also

distinguishes between observer relative facts and intrinsic facts. These distinctions seem to be very relevant in terminological conceptual analysis.

An objective fact is a fact which is independent of people's attitudes and opinions, such as the statement in:

2 Rembrandt lived in Amsterdam in 1632.

A subjective fact is, then, a fact which is dependent on people's attitudes and opinions, such as the statement in:

3, Rembrandt is a better painter than Rubens.

Epistemic facts are the typical ones that we analyse in conceptual analysis. They relate to our knowledge of the external world, such as 2. and 3.

Ontological facts relate to the existence that we can assign to epistemic facts. They can also be either objective, as in:

4. Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world.

or subjective, as in:

5. I have a pain in my foot.

Important for conceptual analysis is also Searle's notion of observer relative facts. The characteristic feature of these types of facts is that they depend ontologically on human intentionality, as opposed to intrinsic facts which exist independently of human intentionality.

Searle uses the concept of a screwdriver as example. Intrinsic features of a screwdriver is that it is made of a certain solid material and that it has a certain chemical composition. Features like the design of the shaft, the adaption to special types of screws and degrees of hardness for the various parts of the object and the presence of magnetism on its tip are all observer relative features. All these features have in common that they make people think that the object is in fact a screwdriver. But the fact that the object is a screwdriver is an epistemically objective fact, but ontologically a subjective fact, or rather, an intersubjective fact, because the object only exists because observers (such as terminologists) and users (such as engineers) regard it as a screwdriver.

So, are all referents to artifacts such as technical tools epistemically objective and ontologically subjective facts? According to Searle they are. Consider:

6. This object is a stone.

7. This stone is a paperweight.

In 6. we refer to the intrinsic properties of the natural kind term "stone", in 7. we refer to the observer relative fact that the stone has been assigned a status function of being a paperweight. An important difference between the paperweight and the screwdriver is that it is possible to read the status functions from the physical design of the screwdriver, whereas there is no such relationship between the stone and the paperweight function. The screwdriver is an artifact and the stone is a natural kind term. The distinction between artifacts and natural kind terms is important in lexical semantics, and both types of terms can in principle be used to denote institutional facts.

Searle also distinguishes between agentive and non-agentive functions. The functions in:

7. *This stone is a paperweight.*

8 *This object is a screwdriver.*

and

9 *This is a chair.*

all mark uses to which we put objects. They do not occur naturally, but are assigned relative to the practical interests of conscious agents. They are called agentive functions. Artifacts are designed specifically to perform these functions. In:

10 *The heart functions to pump blood.*

we assign a perceived function to the natural kind term "heart". This function is non-agentive because it is independent of practical intentions and activities of human agents. But it is still observer relative, because it is related to a teleology of survival and reproduction. If we did not know better we might say that the heart functions to serve God.

It is also an interesting fact that the person actually using some object for an agentive function may not be the agent who actually imposed the function on that object and may even be unaware that the object has that function. Thus most car drivers are probably unaware that the function of the drive shaft is to transmit power from the transmissions to the axles. This is, nevertheless, its agentive function.

This also illustrates Searle's claim that institutional facts reside in actions, not objects. He illustrates this by pointing out that money functions in being exchanges for goods, services, statuses etc. Institutional facts, he says, are primarily processes not products. Studying a dollar bill as an object, the way a natural scientist would tend to do, can hardly reveal what money is for us (cf. The impossibility of reducing institutional facts to brute facts.)

Social objects such as governments, families, property and money are at best place holders for patterns of activities, not things. It is also interesting to note that expanded dynamic analyses of lexemes in lexical semantics, such as the analysis of the concepts of "novel" and "literature", can be analysed as what the computational lexicologist James

Pustejovsky (1991) calls qualia structures with agentive functions incorporated in the lexical analysis. In principle such analyses could be adapted in terminological concept analysis.

Language and institutional facts

One of Searle's basic claims is that language is the basic precondition for the existence of institutional facts: Without language, no institutional facts. This is in accordance with the claim of the social constructionists, but Searle also focuses on language as a symbolic system.

So what is a symbol? A symbol is something which represents something else than itself, something beyond itself. Symbols can never be intrinsic features of entities, because they represent themselves. Symbols have to be ascribed to entities through human intentionality. They are conventional and in principle communicable.

In line with this Searle makes a distinction between language dependent and language independent facts. A fact such as:

11. Mt Everest has snow and ice on its top.

is a language independent fact, according to Searle. If you take away language the fact still exist. The screwdriver on the other hand is a language dependent fact. If you remove the concept of a screwdriver from language the screwdriver would not exist; it cannot exist if nobody recognizes that it exists.

In contrast to language dependent facts, language independent facts do not require linguistic representation for their existence. A dog may have a mental picture of a dog bone without language. As to thoughts, Searle also makes a distinction between language dependent and language independent thoughts, for example the distinction between the dog bone and money. In order to think the thought "This is money" you must have language. In order to proceed from the X to the Y in the formula you need a language dependent status function, because the pure physical makeup of a note gives us no clue to its status as money.

Reference to calendar time is another example of institutional language dependent facts.

12. is an example:

12. Today is 24th of August.

The thought 12. cannot be thought without language: Take away language and there is nothing left. The same goes for the thoughts of cats and dogs: They can only felicitously be referred to in relation to a conceptual system or a lexicon structure. As he states: "Something is a dog only relative to a system for identifying animals and objects generally (op.cit.1995: 65)".

So: What is the difference between reference to calendar time and reference to dogs and cats?

The intrinsic characteristic features of the concept of "dog" exist independently of language, whereas the features characterizing "August" and "24th" are language dependent: Take away language and there is nothing left.

The intrinsic features of "dog" are ontologically objective, whereas the features associated with "August" and "24" are ontologically (inter)subjective, i.e. they exist solely through language.

The same goes for goals in football, money, private property, professors, terminological conferences, etc. They are all ontologically (inter)subjective and epistemically objective.

This means that concrete objects such as natural kinds and artifacts can be analysed both as brute facts and as institutional facts. If they have been assigned status functions and thus transformed to institutional facts, analysis of status functions and associated agentive functions will be basic in the analysis, and the intrinsic functions should be analysed relative to the assigned status functions. This corresponds to the claim in terminological concept theory that functional characteristic features are often better concept indicators than inherent features. One of Searle's contributions here is that the concept of function is made more transparent.

Reference list

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