

## Chapter 2

# Are There Social Objects?

John R. Searle

**Abstract** The fundamental unit of analysis in social ontology is not social objects but Social Facts, specifically Institutional Facts. In spite of the incredible variety of human civilization, all of the specific features of human institutional life are created by a single operation repeated over and over (representations that have the logical form of) the Status Function Declarations. Such representations create institutional reality by declaring Institutional Facts to exist. All Institutional Facts are Status Functions. Status Functions create Deontic Powers, and Deontic Powers provide desire-independent reasons for action. A consequence of this analysis is that the basic unit of social ontology is not the social object but the Institutional Fact. Because Institutional Facts have a propositional structure, they and their representations can function in human rationality in a way that objects cannot. Am I a social object? The question lacks a clear sense. But if you consider such facts as that I am a professor, a citizen of the United States, a property owner, and a licensed driver, all of these are constitutive of institutional reality, and they are all matters of Deontic Power relationships.

The whole subject of social ontology is relatively new in analytic philosophy, and for that reason, among others, we lack an adequate vocabulary and an agreed-on taxonomy for describing the phenomena that we hope to investigate. In my own work, I have found a certain approach to be immensely useful, and I want to present it first before criticizing what I take to be alternative and inconsistent approaches. My approach emphasizes the logical priority of facts over objects where institutional reality is concerned.

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## 2.1 Status Functions and Institutional Facts

In analyzing society, the fundamental unit is not objects but facts. I will explain why in a few moments. The fundamental taxonomy is quite simple and I think reasonably well defined. A Social Fact is any fact involving collective intentionality of two or more animals. So the existence of money and the US government are Social Facts, and a bunch of puppies playing together with a tennis ball on a lawn is also a Social Fact. If the puppies have collective intentionality, that is, if there is any form of cooperation going on, then the process in which they are involved is a Social Fact or indeed a set of Social Facts. An important subset of Social Facts are those involving the creation and maintenance of what I call Status Functions, functions that can only exist because there is a collective acceptance on the part of sufficient numbers of the community that a status exists and with the status a function that can only be performed because there is such a collective acceptance of the status. Money, professors, political institutions, marriages, and governments are Status Functions. I am a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and that position is a Status Function. All Status Functions are Institutional Facts. I originally evolved this terminology because I thought all Status Functions require human institutions for their existence. The institution consists of a set of constitutive rules, typically of the form “X counts as Y in context C.” So, such and such counts as money, such and such counts as a professor, and so on. There is an awkwardness in this in that sometimes a Status Function can be created without a preexisting institution. For example, a group of children might just informally select somebody as the captain of the softball team. I am not sure if everybody would agree that we ought to call such facts Institutional Facts. In any case, I get a more elegant result if I include all of these things as Institutional Facts even if there was no institution prior to the creation of the fact. We get a rather simple and elegant set of derivations and equivalences, and here is how it goes:

1. All Institutional Facts are Social Facts, but not all Social Facts are Institutional Facts.
2. All Institutional Facts are Status Functions and all Status Functions are Institutional Facts. There is thus a complete equivalence between Status Functions and Institutional Facts.
3. Status Functions are created, consciously or unconsciously, by a certain class of linguistic representations, speech acts that have the form of declarations where you make something the case by representing it as being the case. This special subclass of declarations I call Status Function Declarations. All Institutional Facts (Status Functions) are both created in their initial existence and maintained in their continued existence by representations that have the logical form of Status Function Declarations.
4. The point of doing this is to create power, and the power relations are invariably what I call Deontic Powers: rights, duties, obligations, etc., and these are distinctive in that for anyone who accepts the relevant Status Functions, the Deontic Powers provide reasons for action that are independent of the preexisting desires of the agent in question. They create, in short, desire-independent reasons for action.

Not all Deontic Powers are institutional. People can have obligations quite independent of any institutional affiliation. For example, there are obligations that go with being a biological parent, quite apart from any institutional recognition. But, with very few exceptions, Institutional Facts create Deontic Powers. There is little point in creating the Institutional Fact if there is no deontology involved.

I think the exceptions reveal a power of the analysis. One can have an honorific status – one can, for example, become Miss Alameda County – without, officially, at least any new powers accruing. Furthermore, some things that we intuitively and pre-theoretically think of as institutions, such as the Christian calendar, do not as such create Institutional Facts. The fact that today is the 16th of October is not an Institutional Fact because it carries no deontology. Christmas Day, on the other hand, is an Institutional Fact because it has a deontology. I am, for example, entitled to a day off on Christmas Day.

## 2.2 The Priority of Facts over Objects

Why is the unit of analysis the fact rather than the object? There are a number of reasons for this and the following stand out. First, we have seen that the purpose of creating institutional reality is to create new powers. Property, government, money, universities, and summer vacations all enable us to do things that we would not be able to do without them. But how is it that we are given new power by institutional reality? And the answer is these are, without exception, Deontic Powers – rights, duties, obligations, etc. Now notice all of those have a propositional structure, and indeed the powers of institutional reality are always propositional. This means that the basic entities represented that give us the propositional structure must be what I call *factitive*; they must be features of the world that are propositional in structure. Institutional Facts satisfy that condition. Second, the reason that they have to be propositional in structure is that they have to function in human rationality. Human rationality does not operate with objects, it operates with propositional contents. Those propositional contents when true represent facts. So in reasoning what I am to do, I am confronted with such facts as that I am a professor, that I am a citizen of the United States, and that I am a licensed driver in the state of California. All of those factitive entities give me reasons for action of various kinds. So to summarize these two points: the entities created in institutional reality are factitive in structure and they have to be in order to create the powers that we are describing. And, secondly, their representations have to be able to function in human rationality, and those representations being propositional in structure represent entities in the world that have a propositional structure: factitive entities.

The deepest reason why the fundamental unit in social ontology, after collective intentionality, has to be the Institutional Fact and not the social object has to do with the role of institutions in human life and the role of rationality in human action and decision-making. Consider me as a person. Am I a social object? I do not even know how to answer the question under that description. But if you ask

this question as: What about the fact that I am a professor in the University of California, I am a citizen of the United States, I am a tax payer in the state of California, and I am the owner of property in various places? All of these are facts and they function essentially in human rationality and therefore in human behavior. Why? Because rationality requires reasoning, and reasoning has to do with propositional entities. A famous example is "Socrates is a man, all men are mortal, and therefore Socrates is mortal." You cannot get that just out of inspecting Socrates, you have to have whole propositions. Now facts are propositional entities, they are what I call factitives; they have a propositional structure. A fact can function in human reasoning because the representation of the fact is in a propositional form. An object cannot do that. So in one sentence we can say: the priority of facts over objects in social ontology derives from the fact that facts have a factitive structure and therefore can function in human rationality in a way that objects as such cannot. It is only facts about objects which enable them to function in human rationality, and that is the whole point of having a social and institutional reality: it is to have a structure of ontology that functions essentially in motivating human behavior. "Objects" that figure in Institutional Facts are typically placeholders for patterns of activity. Think of corporations, money, and vacations.

Institutional Facts are the glue that holds human civilization together because they provide us with reasons for action that are independent of our inclinations. As far as I know, no nonhuman animals have Institutional Facts. They have desires and rational processes, but no Status Functions and no Institutional Facts. Why not? Well, to have those you have to have a language and you have to have a language with a certain power: the power to perform Status Function Declarations. Again, no nonhuman animal known to me has that.

Now, what is the notion of the social object in this taxonomy? There are social objects: as a professor I am also a human being and thus a material object. The \$20 bill in my hand is an object; it is a piece of paper to which a Status Function has been assigned. But notice that in both cases it is the factitive status and not the "objective" status that matters for human institutional reality. So why do people want to talk about social objects? I think anybody interested in ontology at some point will be concerned with objects. It is no accident that Frege as part of his ontology of mathematics insisted that every number is a self-subsistent object, an independent object. The favorite model of an object is probably a material object, and the notion of a material object can be given at least a rough definition. Roughly speaking, a material object is a three-dimensional spatial entity that exists through the fourth dimension of time and has a solid surface. Such a concept is rough around the edges, but I think it is reasonably well defined. Why cannot we do a definition of a social object on analogy with a material object? I have never seen anybody seriously try to do it, but there is one huge disanalogy to start with. The examples that one can think of as social objects have an existence that is observer relative. So somebody is president or professor or something is a \$20 bill, only relative to the attitudes that people take towards it and other things of that type, and those attitudes create new facts. Something is a material object regardless of what anybody thinks about it. But that is not true of those objects that figure essentially in Institutional Facts, such as the fact that someone is a president or the fact that something is money.

What does all this have to do with the investigation of social ontology in my various books and articles? *It reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of my project if people think that I am trying to define the notion of a social object or the notion of social category of objects.* Consider me, for example. Am I a social object? The only way we could approach this question would be to consider my role in various Social and Institutional Facts. Or perhaps to take a more promising example, consider a tennis ball. Is it a social object? As we have no well-defined technical notion of a social object and as we have no pre-theoretical concept of social objects, I do not know how to begin to answer the question. But now think of the same tennis ball served by my opponent in a tennis game and landing inside the lines of my service court. The fact that he made a good serve is an Institutional Fact and has consequences for the course of the game. The Institutional Fact that the ball was served functions essentially in the game. The ball considered by itself does not have this type of deontology.

Typically, a well-defined general term determines a set as its extension. So the definition I gave of “material object” will determine a set of material objects, and notice that something is a material object regardless of what anybody thinks about it, or if they think anything at all about it. But that is not true of those objects that figure essentially in Institutional Facts, such as the fact that I am a professor or the fact that this piece of paper is money. Anyone who thinks that the concept of a social object figures essentially in social ontology owes us not so much an inventory but a well-defined set of procedures for settling the question whether or not something is a social object, and I know of no such procedures. I think a serious difficulty with the project is that the notion of a set is extensional. Sets are defined by their members, and any two sets with the same members are the same set. But I am not sure that a definition of social object can be given that satisfies this condition. Consider the case of money. To make the account simpler, let us confine it to actual pieces of currency that have a physical existence as money. (Most money has no physical existence. We have only representations of money, not actual currency.) A piece of paper is money, that is, an item of currency, only if people regard it as money and behave appropriately. I have some “Confederate currency.” There was clearly a time when this was money in the early days of the Confederacy. By 1865 it was losing its validity, that is, there was a section of the southern population that continued to regard it as money and use it and accept it as money, but there was another section of the population who no longer had that attitude. Now apply the Law of Excluded Middle. Was this piece of paper money or not at that time? Granted that it is no longer money today, was it then and there money? Notice that the theory of Institutional Facts has no problem answering this. Relative to one community it was money, relative to another community it was not. No puzzle or paradox is created. But if you think money is a social object, that is, currency is a social object, then this *object* has contradictory properties.

I think it may be harmless to talk about social objects and I have, myself, on occasion done so where I think the context made it clear what I am claiming. But it would be a serious mistake to think that a fundamental unit of analysis in social ontology is the notion of a social object. For the analysis of human society, the key notion is that of an Institutional Fact. Talk of objects will then naturally fit in or drop out of consideration as irrelevant.

## 2.3 A Conversation with John Searle: By Mattia Gallotti and John Michael

### *Editors*

In laying out the foundations for a theory of social ontology, you make a fundamental distinction between Social Facts and Institutional Facts. Since you first suggested it in *The Construction of Social Reality*, many philosophers have taken this distinction as a starting point to develop their own approaches to social ontology. However, in focusing especially on the nature of Social Facts, many of these approaches are often formulated in terms that diverge from your initial characterization – referring to social “kinds,” “categories,” “objects,” or “properties” of objects, instead of “facts.” Has this change in the relevant terminology become a source of ambiguity or confusion in current studies of social ontology, particularly when accounts designed to counter your theory use different concepts to articulate their critiques? How could we interpret the concept of Social Facts in a way, if any, that could exploit connections with alternative characterizations?

### *JS*

I think I answered this in “Are There Social Objects?” Anyone misses the point of my analysis if they think I am trying to analyze social objects. Social objects, trivially, occur in the analysis because anything that can be named by a noun phrase can be considered an object. But the fundamental theoretical notion is the notion of a fact, especially Institutional Facts.

### *Editors*

While you postulate collective intentionality at the foundation of the institutional reality, several philosophers are unsure how to interpret the claim that a Social Fact is any fact involving the collective intentionality of two conscious animals. Concerns arise especially from analyses of facts other than Institutional Facts which, nevertheless, appear to be constituents of social reality and yet seem not to require collective intentionality for their formation. For example, in discussing the claim that Social Facts depend on collective attitudes for their creation, some people – following Ruth Millikan – are keen to emphasize that many Social Facts result from gradual processes, as people observe other people using objects in particular ways and copy those uses, adapting them to new purposes and to new contexts, such that some Social Facts seem to be established more through a functional history than through anyone or any group assigning particular Status Functions. So, what does it mean that a Social Fact is any fact involving the collective intentionality of two conscious animals?

*JS*

Suppose one primate begins to dig up insects with a stick. Suppose a second primate observes the first and imitates his behavior. He also digs with a stick. On my account this is not yet a case of collective intentionality, so not yet a Social Fact. “Social Fact” is a technical term, and it is open to anybody to use the term anyway he or she likes, or if somebody wants to call it a Social Fact that is fine by me, but I want a distinction between genuine cases of *collective* intentionality and cases that do not have collective intentionality. Suppose that our two primates get together with a very big stick and together use that stick to dig with – they *cooperate* – now it becomes a Social Fact because you have two agents acting in cooperation. This issue is a matter of arbitrarily defining a technical term, not a matter of making a substantive empirical claim.

The fact that many Institutional Facts gradually evolve over time is in no way an objection to the analysis. I assume, for example, that private property evolved simply out of the practice that people had of possessing and hanging onto certain things. The interesting question is: What is the logical structure of the evolution? Granted that it is typically unconscious, and granted that it is gradual, and granted that it extends overtime, I claim to have identified the logical structure of the resulting Institutional Fact. So the fact that there is a gradual unconscious evolution is in no way an objection.

### *Editors*

A central claim of your theory of social ontology is that Institutional Facts require collective intentionality for their creation, so a theory of social ontology implies a theory of collective intentionality as its foundation. Is there a diversity of ways in which collective intentionality can put Institutional Facts into place? In the paradigm case, multiple individuals collectively intend that “X counts as Y” and do so freely and under conditions of common knowledge. In other cases, though, one person might establish an Institutional Fact by coercion – e.g., a tyrant decreeing that such and such is now a symbol with a particular meaning and function. In still other cases, intentional attitudes spread by contagion as it were, e.g., one person observes a second person expressing reverential awe towards an object and then infers that the object is sacred and subsequently expresses reverential awe towards it, whereupon a third person does the same, etc., until everyone is treating the object with awe. Do you think that in cases like these, Institutional Facts can be put into place without individuals performing acts that require taking a group perspective – as a “we”?

*JS*

There are several different kinds of cases that we are considering, and we need some principles for sorting them out. First of all, in my taxonomy it is not yet an Institutional Fact if it is not collectively accepted. The dictator can create an

Institutional Fact only to the extent that he gets members of the community to accept it. He may get acceptance by force and coercion, but there has to be some recognition on the part of others if it is to be an Institutional Fact.

The point about treating an object with “awe” is this: there is a crucial difference between doing this by oneself and doing it in cooperation with other people. If I regard the moon with awe and you regard the moon with awe, so far no collective intentionality and no Social Facts. If, however, we collectively become moon worshippers and treat the moon as a sacred object, then we have created a Social and, depending on how it is described, an Institutional Fact.

The key point in all of these cases is: Is there a collectively accepted deontology? One human observes another human worshipping the moon and imitates that behavior; there is not yet an Institutional Fact because there is no collective intentionality and no deontology.

### ***Editors***

On your view, Institutional Facts are established when multiple individuals collectively intend to assign Status Functions. For example, money is created when some group of people collectively intend to assign the function of money qua medium of exchange to slips of paper or gold or whatever. How do you analyze cases where the content of the collective intention does not match the Status Function? For example, we may all have the intention to treat one member of the group with deference and thereby accidentally make her or him into a leader/monarch without anyone having the intention of assigning the status of leader/monarch. In such a case, it seems that nobody has an intentional attitude the content of which is that a particular person object should have that particular function. So, do you think that the intentions that create Institutional Facts always contain (i.e., within their content) the constitutive rule which they put into place?

### ***JS***

People can inadvertently create someone as the leader of the tribe just by treating that person with more deference, respect, etc., and yet I want to say, unconsciously, they are creating an Institutional Fact. Why? Because of the way I have described it, a deontology emerges from their collective activity.

The key test is whether or not their activities create a new Institutional Fact and the key index of an Institutional Fact is: Is there a deontology that results? So if treating someone in a certain way assigns that person a certain status, even though the participants may not be fully conscious of assigning this different status, and if the resulting status affects behavior in a way that involves such things as obligations, rights, duties, and responsibilities, then the participants in question have created a new Institutional Fact.

### ***Editors***

Granted that a Social Fact is ontologically dependent on human minds, statements about them can also be epistemically objective. On one possible reading of this distinction and its role in *The Construction of Social Reality*, we can acquire



knowledge of social kinds by pursuing objective and evidence-based scientific research along the lines of scientific research on natural kinds. But if people create Institutional Facts by collectively assigning Status Functions, how can it be that we do not already know everything there is to know about institutional reality? In what ways might our knowledge be incomplete and in need of supplementation by scientific investigation? Would you envision a situation in which people can be in error about which “objects” belong to which social-institutional kinds? If so, in what ways can this kind of error arise?

*JS*

A fascinating set of questions concerns facts about society that are discovered. So, for example, we discovered that we were in a recession where “recession” is defined as a decline in GDP for two or more consecutive quarters. The Institutional Facts in question are all cases of buying, selling, manufacturing, trading, speculating, etc. All of those can only exist if people think that that is what they are. In order for something to be private property, that is, bought and sold, it has to be thought of as private property, and the transaction has to be thought of as buying and selling. But something can be a recession even if no one thinks that is what it is. How is this possible? The answer is that such cases are systematic fallouts of collective intentionality. The collective behavior of a large society has systematic consequences, such as the decline in the gross domestic product.

*Editors*

A central aim of this volume is to explore ways in which social ontology and empirical research on social cognition (in particular on “theory of mind”) can be mutually informative. For example, understanding the neural underpinnings of the capacity to think “as a group,” if any, could help us dispel confusion about certain issues of social ontology like the relation between individual and collective intentionality. In general, it would be interesting to learn whether you think that social-cognitive research might discover facts that would inform or constrain our conceptions of social ontology, and vice versa. For example, given your view that Status Functions must be collectively accepted for an Institutional Fact to come into existence, do you think that learning about Institutional Facts during development, or reasoning about them in adulthood, might depend on the same psychological processes and brain areas that underpin theory-of-mind abilities?

*JS*

The most basic forms of Institutional Facts in such things as private property, marriage, family, and political power are natural outgrowths of more biologically primitive forms of social organization. Once you have pair bonding among human males and females, marriage is not a very big step; it simply institutionalizes the pre-institutional relation. Such is also the case with parenthood: “male parent”

refers to a biological relation, and in our society, “fatherhood” adds an institutional component. Similarly with ownership of tools and dwellings: sheer possession evolves into ownership. I do not know if there is any well-defined neurobiological substrate for this evolution, but it would be interesting to find out.

### *Editors*

Contemporary philosophical investigation has grown pluralistic and interdisciplinary. So, for example, there has been far more intermingling of analytic, naturalistic, and phenomenological approaches in recent years than seemed thinkable 20 years ago. This pluralism has clearly enriched and inspired philosophical research, but does this come at the cost of an overarching philosophical program or methodology? In more detail, does pluralism perhaps stand in the way of developing the kind of systematic “grand theory” of intentionality, consciousness, language, and sociality that you have so greatly contributed to articulate over more than 50 years of philosophical reflection?

### *JS*

I think the right way to proceed in philosophy is simply for the philosopher to follow the questions that interest him or her. This is what I have always done, and I would recommend it to other people. Some very good philosophy is done by people who adopt a piecemeal approach. My own approach to philosophy has always been to try to develop the piecemeal answers to specific questions within larger theoretical frameworks. For me, the overall question is: How do we account for the human reality within what we know about the basic reality from physics, chemistry, and the other natural sciences? The steps in the development of that theory are to show, first of all, how consciousness and intentionality are biological phenomena naturally evolved by certain kinds of animals and, secondly, how some of them, specifically humans, developed language. What exactly is language and how is it structured? And third, how, once we have an account of language, we can give an account of human social reality that shows the role of language and collective intentionality in the creation, constitution, and maintenance of social reality. This is how I work in philosophy, but I am not insisting that other people should work this way.

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