Circularity in Searle's Social Ontology: With a Hegelian Reply

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Abstract

John Searle's theory of social ontology posits that there are indispensable normative components in the linguistic apparatuses termed status functions, collective intentionality, and collective recognition, all of which, he argues, make the social world. In this paper, I argue that these building blocks of Searle's social ontology are caught in a *petitio* of constitutive circularity. Moreover, I note how Searle fails to observe language in reciprocal relation to the institutions which not only are shaped by it but also shape language's practical applications. According to Searle, social theorists that tried to show a connection between society, culture, and language all failed to see the constitutive role of language in the making of social reality. Consequently, I believe that Searle is himself guilty of a certain kind of blind presumption, and argue that Hegel's philosophy of culture, which Searle dismisses as implausible, offers a more cohesive account of the normative transactions between human beings and their social world.

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1. Introduction

In the Preface of *Making the Social World*, John R. Searle (2010) states that he is continuing a line of research he began in his (1995) earlier work, *The Construction of Social Reality*, though many of the shared themes in these two books were also developed in (Searle, 2008) *Mind, Language, and Society*, wherein he argued for a mind-dependent theory of society. In *The Construction of Social Reality*, Searle professed an interest in problems of social ontology "having to do with how the various parts of the world relate to each other" (Searle, 1995, p. xi), and his examination of these problems led him to argue that because human attitudes are constitutive of social reality, and because those attitudes have propositional contents with logical relations, the institutional facts of human societies have a logico-linguistic structure (Searle, 1995, pp. 90, 104-112).

Consequently, Searle continues to stand by his belief that "all institutional reality is created by linguistic representation" (Searle, 2010, p. 14), and he proceeds to examine the fundamental preconditions that form the building blocks of social reality. As one reads through the text, it is evident that Searle embarks on an incredibly ambitious project to explicate how social reality derives from nothing outside of what he calls basic facts, which are akin to the foundations "given by physics and chemistry, by evolutionary biology and other natural sciences. We need to show how all the other parts of reality are dependent on, and in various ways, derive from, basic facts" (Searle, 2010, p. 4). Searle's (2010) appeal to basic facts aims to describe and explain how social, institutional structures,

> are based on one principle …. In physics it is the atom, in chemistry it is the chemical bond, in biology it is the cell, in genetics it is the DNA molecule, and in geology it is the tectonic plate. I will argue that there is similarly an underlying principle of social ontology. (pp. 6-7)

If Searle is successful, he will have formulated a kind of *Social Theory of Everything*, a unifying formula capable of expressing the movement "from electrons to elections and from protons to presidents", as well as the ontological stability of other social phenomena like "cocktail parties, and income taxes" (pp. 3-4).

According to Searle, the underlying principle is found in one formal linguistic mechanism; more specifically, he argues that the logical structure of social reality can be put in the following manner: social institutions can be said to exist only insofar as they are recognized, and that such recognition has to be symbolic, i.e., linguistic. As Searle (1995) puts it,

> Certain sorts of sounds of marks count as words and sentences, and certain sorts of utterances count as speech acts. The agentive function is that of representing, in one or other of the possible speech act modes, objects and states of affairs in the world. Agents who can do this collectively have the fundamental precondition of all other institutional structures: Money, property, marriage, government, and the universities all exist by forms of human agreement that essentially involve the capacity to symbolize. (p. 228)

Ultimately, Searle's (2010) answer to "how the various parts of the world relate to each other" posits that the human capacity to symbolize underlies all of institutional reality, and furthermore, this capacity is owed to a biological, specifically neurophysiological 'Background'. Searle's (2010) definition of Background is often too abstruse, incorporating elements of the biological and nonbiological in one broad collection of presupposed abilities. However, in his earlier works, he offers a definition of this Background as "nonintentional or preintentional capacities that enable intentional states to function …. [these are] neurophysiological structures that function causally in the production of intentional phenomena" (Searle, 1995, p. 129) which are held in "human brains and bodies" (Searle, 1983, p. 154).

Subsequently, Searle not only continues to develop the previous claims he made in *The Construction of Social Reality*, he also makes substantial changes to some of his former views, e.g., his reversal on an analogy he made in his book *Speech Acts* (Searle, 1969),

namely, that there is a similarity between language and games. Searle (2010) now sees how this analogy is flawed: "You can't use the analogy with games to explain language because you understand games only if you already understand language" (Searle, 2010, p. 115). Later in this paper, implicit in my Hegelian reply to Searle's (2010) theory of social ontology is that you understand games and language only if you are already situated in culture.

However, more important for our present purposes, Searle (2010) puts forward a *new* argument for his case that "human social institutional reality" is created and maintained in existence by a unique kind of speech act he "baptizes" as Status Function Declarations or SF Declarations (pp. 12-13), which depend on being collectively recognized. According to Searle, SF Declarations *make* and *change* the social world. Moreover, he argues that while social reality is dependent on language, language itself is not dependent on social reality:

> [L]anguage is different from other social institutions, different in such a way as to make the existence of all the others dependent on language …. All human social institutions are brought into existence and continue their existence by a single logico-linguistic operation that can be applied over and over again … There is a top-down connection between language and institutional facts: you cannot have institutional facts without language (Searle, 2010, pp. 62-63).

Correspondingly, Searle's book also draws attention to alleged deficits in the work of other philosophers and social theorists who seem to take language for granted. He argues that such thinkers have all presupposed language in their theories without notice to how social institutions such as, *inter alia*, money and marriage, depend on language for their existence: e.g., thinkers like "Aristotle through Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel to Habermas, Bourdieu, and Foucault" (Searle, 2010, p. 62), as well as Idealists like "Kant" and "Hegel" (Searle, 1998, pp. 16-18), all failed to see the essentially constitutive role of language in the making of social reality.

In this paper, I would like to argue that Searle is guilty of a certain kind of blind presumption. First, the structural framework of his theory of social ontology is constitutively circular. Commentators, like Barry Smith (2003), have drawn attention to how Searle seems to put the cart before the horse or, as cleverly sketched by Joseph Margolis (2012a), has perhaps fallen prey to "Rousseau's joke" (Margolis, 2012a, pp. 102, 104), suggesting the circularity of drawing a social contract: i.e., in order for parties to form a social contract, they must first contract to form a social contract. Both of these appraisals draw attention to potentially insuperable contradictions in an otherwise rich collection of work in social ontology. In a similar spirit, but taking a narrower, more circumscribed approach, within these pages, I wish to perform an immanent critique by focusing on the basic building blocks of Searle's theory to show how these constitutive, fundamental parts are trapped in an inescapable *petitio*. Searle's ideas of status functions, collective intentionality, and collective recognition are all begging the question – they are caught in a vicious circle. Second, because Searle is offering an account of what he takes to be the fundamental underpinnings of *extant* social institutions, the other claim that I want to take seriously in this paper is that the formal, i.e., logical, constituents of Searle's (2010) social ontology are themselves embedded in cultural webs of *already existing* institutions, practices, and traditions which shape language in reciprocal relation to the social world. Toward this goal, I turn to G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of culture, which Searle (1995) dismisses as implausible, offers a more cohesive account of the normative transactions between human beings and their social world.

2. Status Functions

Searle (2010) argues that the distinctive feature of human social reality is that human beings have the capacity to impose functions on objects and people. He calls this distinctive feature "status functions", which "are the glue that holds society together" (p. 9). We can think of status functions as representational assignments which work by standing in for something else, namely, some human institution. The efficacy of a status function is proved by how well it obtains the purpose of the

institution it represents. However, for a status function to produce its desired effect, its rule-bearing *deontic powers*, or the "rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions, privileges, authority, and the like" (Searle, 2010, p. 164), must be collectively recognized:

> The performance of a function requires that there be a collectively recognized status that the person or object has, and it is only in virtue of that status that the person or object can perform the function in question …. [A]ll people or objects [are] able to perform certain functions in virtue of the fact that they have a collectively recognized status that enables them to perform those functions in a way they could not do without collective recognition of the status. (p. 7)

Status Functions are, therefore, institutional facts (like money, presidents, etc.), which are dependent on collective recognition for their deontic powers:

> It is only in virtue of collective recognition that this piece of paper is a twenty-dollar bill, that Barack Obama is president of the United States, that I am a citizen of the United States, that the Giants beat the Dodgers three to two in eleven innings, and that the car in the driveway is my property. (p. 8)

Searle's (2010) discussion of the distinctive feature of status functions is taken up in his introduction of "a fascinating class of speech acts" called "Declarations":

> The main theoretical innovation of this book, and one, though not the only, reason for my writing it is that I want to introduce a very strong theoretical claim. All institutional facts, and therefore all status functions, are created by speech acts of a type that in 1975 I baptized as "Declarations". (p. 11)

Declarations are performative utterances that instantiate social reality by linguistic fiat. They are forms of illocutionary speech acts that shape and change the world in the following manner: a declaration is made that something is the case, and thus, something is the case. Searle's (2010) 'fascination' with Declarations

leads him to make a very ambitious pronouncement for what he calls Status Function Declarations (SF Declarations): "The claim that I will be expounding and defending in this book is that all of human institutional reality is created and maintained in existence by…SF Declarations" (p. 13). This is a major claim because SF Declarations "create an institutional reality of status functions by representing them as existing" (p, 13). However, just as we noted with status functions, Searle (2010) argues the creation of institutional facts by SF Declarations is achieved by representational assignments which also *depend* on being collectively recognized, namely, by the collective recognition of constitutive rules,

> The most general form of the creation of an institutional fact is that we (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the status function Y exists. Constitutive rules of the form 'X counts as Y in C' are what we might think of as *standing Declarations.* (p. 13)

Let us summarize the findings of section 2 above as Searlean Supposition 1: Both status functions and SF Declarations are dependent on collective recognition for their world-making deontic powers.

3. Collective Intentionality

My examination of Searle's explication of status functions and SF Declarations has shown that both are dependent on collective recognition if they are to succeed in creating and maintaining all human institutional reality. The importance of collective recognition is developed by Searle (2010) in his discussion of collective intentionality in planning and acting (i.e., social cooperation). For example, Searle (2010) believes that collective intentionality is "the fundamental building blocks of all social ontology and human society in general [and] the most important form of collective intentionality is collective intentions in planning and acting" (p. 43).

Although Searle (2010) seems to conflate the two sorts of collectives in an ambiguous disjunction, e.g., "I can say that for status functions to work, there must be collective acceptance or recognition … The point is that status functions can only work to the extent

that they are collectively recognized …. Status functions depend on collective intentionality" (p. 8), the distinct division of world-making labor seems to be that status functions depend on collective intentionality, which itself depends on being collectively recognized for status functions to succeed.

Collective intentions in planning and acting involve not only cooperative behavior, but, more importantly, also set the norms and standards to which cooperative participants are subject. Searle (2010) posits two hypothetical scenarios to convey his idea of collective intentions in planning and acting. In (1), he imagines a group of Harvard Business School graduates, who, sold on Adam Smith's theory of the invisible hand, embark on a post-graduation goal to better the world by being as selfish as they possibly can to become as rich as they can. In this scenario, each graduate has the same individual goal, and each knows that all others have the same goal and know of its shared nature. In (2), the same case is mirrored, except that the graduate students make a *pact* to carry the Smithian banner in pursuit of humanity's betterment. Searle (2010) argues that only (2) is a case of collective intentionality in virtue of an *obligation* assumed by each individual member, while the first case presented no such obligation.

The difference between the two cases may be put in the following way. Because there was no obligation in the first case, there was no deontic power underlying the graduates' actions. For Searle (2010), collective intentionality is not merely the sum of individual behavior toward the fulfillment of a goal,

> Just having the same goal, even having the same goal in the knowledge that they know that I share the same goal with them, is not by itself enough for cooperation in my sense. When I talk about this form of collective intentionality, I am talking about the capacity of humans and other animals to actually cooperate in their activities. Cooperation implies the existence of common knowledge or belief, but the common knowledge or belief, together with individual intentions to achieve a common goal is not by itself sufficient for cooperation. (p. 49)

Thus collective intentionality "cannot in general be reduced to individual intentionality plus mutual belief" (p. 57). Genuine collective intentionality is instead dependent on collective recognition of certain norms and standards to which the cooperative participants are subject. Searle (2010) argues that such norms are the deontic rules by which institutions function,

> As a general point, institutional structures require collective recognition by the participants in the institution in order to function …. [Moreover,] I want to emphasize that in order for cooperation to take place within an institutional structure, there has to be a general collective recognition or acceptance of the institution that does not necessarily involve active participation. (p. 57)

Consequently, status functions *depend* on collective intentionality and collective intentionality is *dependent* on collective recognition. Let us summarize the findings of section 3 as Searlean Supposition 2: As we noted with SF Declarations, collective intentionality is also dependent on collective recognition for institutional structures to function.

Collective recognition is, therefore, a *sine qua non* condition for the possibility of making the social world, lest the shared work so necessary for world-making is lost. Consequently, we might, along with Searle (2010), ask: "Of what does collective recognition, which makes possible collective intentionality, consist?" (p. 58).

4. Collective Recognition

We have seen how Searle believes that status functions, SF Declarations, and collective intentionality work only insofar as they are collectively recognized. Accordingly, because collective recognition is central for Searle's ideas of Status Functions, SF Declarations, and Collective Intentionality, all of which play distinctive and crucial roles in the making of social reality, we must understand collective recognition, and what gives it its *foundational* status.

Searle (2010) offers an answer by explaining that general collective recognition or acceptance of institutional structures need not entail approval of any particular institutional structure. He points to the case of members of the "Nazi party" (p. 57) that might not have approved or endorsed the institutional structure of Germany while governed under Adolf Hitler, but which nonetheless accepted the institutional structures, rules, and norms of the Third Reich. Hence when it comes to collective recognition, acceptance need not be conflated with approval.

Consequently, we can understand collective recognition or acceptance involving persons collectively coming to hold, and holding, a relevant social attitude which is recognized in the mode of 'we' instead of 'I'. The acceptance of institutional structures entails that social institutions are taken to be norm-governed social practices, whether one approves of those practices or not. Disapproval of an institutional structure, for example, does not mean that the institutional structure is not recognized, but the contrary.

Searle employs his Harvard Business School case and the validity of money to illustrate the notion of general acceptance. He argues that collective recognition consists in the requirement "that each participant [in the Harvard Business School case] accepts the existence and validity of money [i.e., a status function] in the belief that there is mutual acceptance on the part of the others" (Searle, 2010, p. 58). In other words, in answer to the question, "Of what does collective recognition consist?" (Searle, 2010, p. 59) it appears collective recognition is constituted by the fact that persons recognize a status function (e.g., money) and, concomitantly, that there is mutual knowledge among the persons that they all recognize that status function.

Collective recognition is, therefore, nothing other than the general acceptance on the part of human beings to such things as status functions, SF Declarations, and collective intentionality. Let us summarize the findings of section 4 as Searlean Supposition 3: Collective recognition depends on the existence of status functions, SF Declarations, and collective intentionality.

That collective recognition, upon which status functions, SF Declarations, and that enable collective intentionality, turns out to be dependent on these *already existing* formal constituents of Searle's theory is, of course, stepping into the mire of *petitio principii*. Recall that Searle described SF Declarations as a kind of status function that carries deontic powers which depend on being collectively recognized. In other words, a status function is not accorded its function and deontic powers unless it is collectively recognized. In addition, collective intentionality, which allows for shared membership in world-making cooperation, also depends on collective recognition. However, if collective *recognition* or *acceptance* can only occur in the presence of an already existing status function, this would seem to suggest that there is a deontic power *already* attached to the status function before its recognition as such.

I want to restate the following relational structure. Status functions (A) are dependent on collective intentionality (B), which itself is dependent on collective recognition (C); however, Searle writes that collective recognition (C) can only take place before an already established status function (A). I want to illustrate this circularity by sketching out another of Searle's (2008) examples, namely, in the following 'parable',

> Suppose a community builds a wall around its dwellings. The wall now has a collectively assigned function, which function it can perform in virtue of its structure. But suppose the wall gradually decays until the only thing that is left is a line of stones. But suppose that the people continue to *recognize* the line of stones as a *boundary*, they continue to *accept* that they are *not supposed to* cross. The line now performs the function that the wall once performed, but it performs the function not in virtue of its physical structure but in virtue of the collective acceptance that the line of stones now has a certain *status* and with that status a *function* which can only be performed in virtue of the collective acceptance of that status. (p. 33; see also, Searle, 1995, pp. 39-40)

In the above example, the material wall was built as a boundary not to be crossed. The wall's function is not symbolic but concrete, it is literally obstructing and fulfills its purpose by virtue of its impassibility. However, after the material wall decays over time and concretely disappears, its remnant line of rubble holds the same deontic powers in the community due to its members' capacity toward collective intentionality and, thus, the leftover line of rocks bears the same purpose as the previous wall because of collective recognition of its symbolic status function.

After examining Searle's (2008) 'parable', we can state that the status function (i.e., the SF Declaration, do not transgress this boundary) is dependent on the community's members collective intentionality (all obey its deontic command, even though the wall is now rubble) by virtue of same community's recognition or acceptance of the duty not to transgress this boundary, hence the recognition of its symbolic function (i.e., the SF Declaration). Presumably, a group of individuals who are not members of this community would not obey this duty because, well, being outside this culture, they do not recognize any such vestige prohibition. In order for these alien individuals to recognize the symbolic function in their encounter with a line of rocks, they would have to be told something like the parable above from members of the community, i.e., that there used to be a wall to keep us from going past this point, it is no longer here, but we all adhere to its old purpose anyway. Now that those outside the cultural loop have been instructed to recognize the deontic power of the rocks' symbolic status function, they might say, OK, we'll also do like you do. And so the alien group joins the community through collective intentionality because they have been instructed to recognize the deontic power of the symbolic status function. What this seems to imply is that status functions (A) are only followed through collective intentionality (B) by being collectively recognized (C) as status functions (A). And this is indeed circular.

5. Where is Culture in Searle's Social Ontology?

What is also striking about Searle's account of social ontology is his omission of any discussion of the role that culture (*Bildung*)

might play in the making of the social world. Although his characterization of collective recognition seems to bear the imprint of culture, there is no discussion of cultural forms such as art, religion, customs, and traditions, or of how such forms might help to shape our understanding of institutional facts and structures. This appears to be a concerted move on Searle's part, who, as we have seen, faults theorists (like Kant and Hegel) who take culture seriously in their social and political theories for failing to note the socially constitutive role of language. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, given our understanding of Searle's bio-, the neuro-centric theory of language. And yet this seems a strange oversight because Searle (2002) has already hinted at the constitutive role of culture in his critique of Noam Chomsky's innatist theory of language,

> [I]n order to understand, for example, the word 'bureaucrat', a child has to be introduced to a culture, a culture that includes governments, bureaus, departments, powers, employment, and a host of other things. A child does not learn a set of discrete concepts, but learns to master a culture, and once that culture is mastered, it is not difficult for him to understand the word 'bureaucrat'. (p. 35)

Substitute the word 'bureaucrat' with 'status functions' and you can begin to form concerns with Searle's own indifference to culture in his theory of social ontology. Indeed, it is without the slightest hesitation that he has rejected theories with strong cultural emphases from his work of how language makes the social world. For example, Searle (1995) dismisses out of hand the idea that Hegel's conception of *Geist* or "Spirit" (p. 25) can add any meaningful relevance to collective intentionality.

However, Hegel has important things to say about the normative formation of collective intentionality and institutional structures. This is a recognized and long-standing research agenda for thinkers studying the intersection between language and culture, and can be summarized in Robert Brandom's (2019) recent remark that,

> For [Hegel's philosophy] invites us to think of the norms that transform us into discursive beings by governing our activities—*Bildung*, the culture that is our second nature, Hegelian *Geist*—as instituted by those very activities. Such an approach presents us as self-constituting beings: creatures of norms we ourselves create. (p. 12)

Recall that norms constitute the deontic power of Searle's status function. Now consider an institution that requires reciprocal recognition of contractual obligation (Searle uses money as an example of this over and again). Whatever Searle might think of the Hegelian world spirit, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) and the *Philosophy of Right* (1967), the constitutive element of social reality (*soziale Wirklichkeit*) are outlined by arguing that for an agent to realize her own ends, she must recognize her fellow human beings as partners who are normatively able to abide by their contractual obligations. One of the best expressions of this recognition is clearly and succinctly put forward by Frank B. Farrell's (1994) phrase, "self-relating-in-relating-to-otherness" (1994, p. 24; 2019, pp. 42-43), which conveys the notion that human normative transactions require finding oneself in a relationship to otherness, thereby taking part in the unity of a social whole.

This mutual recognition is not attained through appeal to a neurophysiological Background of basic facts, however necessary to symbolic representation, but rather through the indelible stamp of culture. Culture is formed by Spirit to transform social reality according to its needs, and language is one such construct. C*ontra* Searle, it might be claimed with Joseph Margolis' (2012b) "Darwinized-Hegelian" reading of the reciprocal relation between language and culture,

> External *Bildung* accounts for the originary appearance of true language as the emergent outcome of a continuous series of progressive transformations of the forms of prelinguistic hominid communicative powers through the processes of cultural evolution .… Language and what language uniquely makes possible in the way of the evolving powers of the human mind are

> emergent, artifactual, hybrid precipitates of the joint process of biological and cultural evolution. (pp. 131, 133)

Here Margolis draws attention, rightly I believe, to how external cultural conditions, i.e., external *Bildung*, make possible the emergence of internal subjective states. The Darwinian aspect is captured in how arbitrariness and contingency allow for a rich emergence of cultural artifacts, which includes the formation of human beings in their practices; the Hegelian aspect is seen in how Hegel's notion of objective spirit (political institutions, art, religion) is shaped by the subjective spirit (feelings of selfhood), which, in its ongoing process of historical development, changes the world according to its own self-understanding. Culture is the expression of spirit, as it both shapes and is shaped. For Hegel, the distinction between "outer" (object) and 'inner" (subject) is dissolved, which is why ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*, i.e., extant social practices and arrangements, is so necessary to the formation of Spirit (*Geist*).

An example of external *Bildung* is sketched out in Hegel's (1967) *Philosophy of Right*, specifically with regard to market transactions. The transformation of natural needs into interests capable of being executed in exchanges requires the articulation of one's own specific wishes in a language that is universal enough to permit one to use it to declare an interest that the other will comprehend. Hegel (1967, p. 240) argues that this language *already includes* the social concept of monetary value and the deferral of satisfaction until after the close of the transaction. Hegel (1967) makes clear that, with some modification to Searle's idiom, the collective recognition of a status function requires participation in already established practices. The market exchange of money (*Geld*) is one such practice, and that fluency, namely, to collectively recognize money as a thing with a status function, requires culture. Money only has value, and therefore can only perform its function, in an already spun cultural web of relations which serve as background norms.

One might question what values go into one's choosing to approve or disapprove an

institutional structure. Indeed, Searle (2010) asks at one point, "But where do values come from?" (p. 59). His answer points to the assignment of purposive functions for evaluative appraisals by human beings. For example, Searle (2010) argues that, "The clue that there is a normative component to the notion of function is that once we have described something in terms of function we can introduce a normative vocabulary" (p. 59).

But if this is so, then the appraising human beings who are the users of a normative vocabulary are also already encultured, like the Harvard Business School students of a Harvard Business School culture who collectively raised the Smithian banner to, in their minds, help the world. Hegel's serious consideration of culture in the making of social reality shows that we not only create social institutions but also that these institutions work to form us as social selves.

6. Concluding Remarks

If I have been careful in my explication of Searle's idea of the world-making capacities of status functions, SF Declarations, and collective intentionality; and if I am right that status functions and SF Declarations and collective intentionality are dependent on collective recognition for their world making deontic powers; and if I am right that collective recognition is accepting of already established status functions, SF Declarations, and collective intentionality, I believe to have offered a plausible conclusion that the relation, and formulation, of these basic constituents of Searlean social ontology are trapped in a circular web.

Moreover, with regard to Searle's (1995) doubt that Hegel's philosophy has anything relevant to contribute in our understanding of language and society, Hegel's (1967, 1977) serious consideration of culture shows that we not only create our laws and institutions but that these laws and institutions also create us. Culture thus forms a crucial part of who we are both as individuals and as members of a society. And this *poietic* activity is not circular but rather is a process of back and forth transactional transformation. It is not just that we make our cultural and social institutions; they make us.

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