

Critique of telic power

Sandro Guli' and Luca Moretti
University of Aberdeen

Draft of 12/01/24

ABSTRACT

To build a bridge between the approach of ideal and non-ideal social ontologists to the study of social phenomena, Åsa Burman has recently introduced the important notion of telic power and differentiated it from deontic power. This paper aims to analyse and criticise telic power. We argue that Burman is correct in considering deontic power and telic power as different types of social power, and we agree that combining them in explanations can be theoretically illuminating. We suggest that telic power is especially useful to explain how social conflict can break out. However, we contend that the relation between teleological normativity and telic power has not been fully clarified and requires further investigation. Furthermore, we argue that Burman's thesis that telic power can exist in the absence of deontic power is very doubtful: in the social world, telic power is typically not, and probably cannot be, ontologically disjoined from deontic power. We suggest that the telic and deontic dimensions of social normativity support each other in shaping social power.

1. Introduction: essential background and the aims of the paper

As Åsa Burman (2023: Chap. 2) points out, over the past two decades, mainstream social ontology has been criticised by a growing number of philosophers, mainly due to the one-sided choice of social phenomena typically analysed in it. What Francesco Guala (2007) calls the 'standard model of social ontology' (SMOSO)—exemplified by the influential works of Margaret Gilbert, John Searle, Raimo Tuomela, Barry Barnes, Michael Bratman, and Ian Hacking,¹ among others—tends to ground social theorising in the analysis of depoliticised phenomena such as, for example, taking a walk together, organising a picnic,² or institutions such as money or being a professor. In other words, the SMOSO tends to focus on small-scale, egalitarian, cooperative groups, or codified institutional roles so that it abstracts away from the messiness that often characterises social reality. More conflictual and divisive phenomena such as those concerning gender, race or economic classes are typically ignored. A shared concern is that this limited choice of examples and paradigms of social phenomena conveys a picture of the social world as a predominantly consensual and harmonious domain. This picture is partial, if not just deeply deceptive. Burman (2023: 2) calls 'ideal social ontology' the type of social ontology that gravitates around the SMOSO and shares the choice of the same type of examples of social phenomena. She joins the voices of other

¹ Guala (2007) contends that these philosophers share certain theoretical assumptions about the key features of social entities that have shaped the debate in social ontology. For a concise description of the SMOSO, see Burman (2023: 72-78).

² These events can provide opportunities for political activities (such as collective deliberation), but they are not inherently political.

scholars in complaining that ideal social ontology, insofar as it is concerned with an idealised version of the social world, is silent about the forms of oppression and injustice that afflict or can afflict real social groups and institutions.

As expected, the recent critique of ideal social ontology has been accompanied by novel work in the field that has intentionally focused on more conflictual or divisive social phenomena, contributing to a significant expansion or redefinition of social ontology. Burman (2023: 2-3) dubs ‘non-ideal social ontology’ this new stream of research. A central aim of non-ideal social ontology is to contribute to understanding and, in some cases, fighting various types of social oppression and injustices, such as racism and sexism. For instance, Ásta (2018) aims to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms contributing to social injustice by investigating the construction of various social categories, including sex and race. Katharine Jenkins (2023) defines, articulates and applies the notion of ontic oppression to race and gender. Sally Haslanger (2000) offers Marxist-inspired analyses of gender and race, to produce useful theoretical tools in the struggle against social injustice.

Although Burman praises non-ideal social ontologists for their innovative analyses, she worries that if we simply switch from the traditional idealised version of social reality to these new frameworks, we will once again end up with a partisan picture: in this case, one describing social reality as ‘world of constant conflicts in need of a revolution’ (2023: 3). Burman’s main goal is thus that of building a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology to produce a more thorough and objective understanding of social reality. In doing this, she uses the notion of *social power* as a central analytical tool since she is convinced that ‘nearly all the relevant social phenomena are about different types of social power’ (2023: 3). Accordingly, Burman approaches the study of the ontology of social phenomena by focusing on the modes of existence and the effects of the different types of social powers. She argues that SMOSO has worked with too limited a conception of social power that essentially reduces it to *deontic power* (cf. 2023: 75). The latter is a type of power proper to social functions and institutions that can be defined in terms of deontic notions, such as entitlements and commitments, rights and duties, authorisations and obligations, or enablements and constraints.

Searle is one of the most influential theorists of deontic power and the one to whom Burman (2023) explicitly or implicitly constantly refers when considering this notion. Let us dwell on Searle’s framework. For Searle (2010: 148), an agent A has power over an agent A* about a possible action B if and only if A can intentionally get A* to do what A wants regarding B (i.e. doing B or refraining from doing B), whether or not A* wants to do it.³ The final specification, ‘whether or not A* wants to do it is intended by Searle as a triple disjunction: even if A* does not want to do it, or A* would not have wanted to do it without A’s getting A* to want to do it, or A* would not have wanted to do it if A had not prevented A* from knowing all available options (cf. 2010: 147).

Within this general understanding of power, social powers—specifically intended by Searle as deontic powers—are the rights and obligations that they possess in virtue of their social roles, where these rights and obligations are enacted when the agents behave in accordance with what is required by these social roles. The latter roles are conceived of by Searle as special functions—called by him ‘status functions’—which require the individuals who have them to exercise their agency or be subject to the agency of others in the appropriate circumstances (cf. 2010: 7-11). Status functions are collectively assigned to

³ Unlike Foucault, Searle (2010: 145) maintains that a power is a *capacity* of an agent that can exist even without being used.

individuals⁴ and they need to be collectively recognised in order to exist (cf. 2010: 8). Examples of status functions for individuals are the ones of judge, lawyer, lecturer, referee, spokesperson, parliamentarian, prime minister, friend, parent, and lover. For Searle, positive deontic powers consist of having certain rights, and negative deontic powers consist of having certain obligations (cf. 2010: 9). For instance, a lecturer typically has the rights to use an office and the university computer system, and the obligations to teach students and hold office hours. A police officer typically has the right to search other citizens in certain circumstances, and these citizens have the obligation to satisfy the police officer's request to be searched in the same circumstances. Deontic powers do not act through physical force, threat of violence or psychological pressure. They instead get one to do something without using coercion, in virtue of one's mere recognising a status function—that is, one's own status function or someone else's status function. In Searle's view, deontic power provides reasons for action in the sense that the recognition of a status function supplies desire-independent reasons for action (cf. 2010: 123-132).⁵

Burman (2023: Chap. 3) notes that deontic power remains the central concept of power even in non-ideal models of social ontology. These models analyse social reality from the perspective of phenomena such as gender and race, but they often assume that being a member of a social group based on gender and race essentially means being subject to constraints and enablements, which are deontic properties (see for instance Ásta 2018 and Jenkins 2023). Burman criticises this approach by arguing that the sole appeal to deontic normativity cannot capture some crucial aspects of gender and race. For the normative nature of gender and race depends, not only on constraints and enablements, but also on certain shared *ideals*—for example, those of femininity and masculinity, and those of black people and white people. This means that the individuals belonging to a certain gender or race are subject to the normative force of these ideals and may strive to conform to or resist these standards. According to Burman, all this indicate that there is an important form of social normativity that is *teleological* rather than deontic, one characterised by a 'normative pull' generated by shared ideals. Burman contends that just as deontic normativity grounds deontic power, teleologic normativity grounds telic power,⁶ where these two forms of social power are both conceptually and ontologically separate.

This paper fits within Burman's project of building a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology through the analysis of social power. While, as we have seen, the notion of deontic power has already been dissected, the one of telic power is a new proposal.⁷ Our paper aims to analyse and criticise it. We think that Burman is correct in keeping deontic power and telic power conceptually separated, and we agree that combining these two distinct notions in explanations is theoretically illuminating and fruitful. We suggest that telic power is especially useful to explain how social conflict can break out. However, we contend that the relation between teleological normativity and telic power has not been fully clarified by Burman and requires further investigation. We also find Burman's thesis that telic power can exist in the absence of deontic power is very doubtful: in the social world, telic power is normally not, and probably cannot be, *ontologically* disjoined from deontic power. We

⁴ They are also assigned to groups of individuals and objects. Furthermore, Searle (2010: 21-21) points out that certain status functions—such as those of corporations and virtual money—do not even require agents or physical objects to exist.

⁵ A desire-independent reason for action is such that the reason is prior to the desire and grounds the desire. A desire-dependent reason for action is such that the desire is prior to the reason grounds the reason.

⁶ Burman's proposal fits into a more general framework that she calls a 'pluralistic account of social power'. This framework distinguishes between social powers directly dependent on the intentionality of agents and those that do not directly depend on it. The resulting taxonomy comprises *deontic* and *telic* power as forms of direct powers, and *spillover* and *structural* power as forms of indirect powers (cf. 2023: Chap. 6).

⁷ It was first introduced in Burman's PhD dissertation, published as Andersson (2007).

suggest that the telic and deontic dimensions of social normativity sustain each other in shaping social power.

In more detail, Sec. 2 introduces and analyses Burman's view of teleological normativity. Sect. 3 details Burman's notion of telic power. Sect. 4 criticises Burman's analysis of the differences between telic power and deontic power. Sect. 5 presents additional reasons for differentiating between telic and deontic power. Sect. 6 outlines a conception of social normativity that unifies ontologically telic and deontic power and concludes the paper.

2. Teleological normativity

Burman (2023: 176) points out that when it comes to social power, the tendency to concentrate on deontic power—proper to ideal social ontologists—often goes hand in hand with 'a consensus-oriented view of social phenomena, rather than regarding them in terms of conflict and contestation'. She suggests that appealing to other forms of power can allow us to explain important instances of conflict and contestation in the social world. Let us, therefore, examine telic power, introduced by Burman through the analysis of teleological normativity.

Following Searle, Burman (2023) reminds us that *deontic* normativity exists in the social world because 'the mere recognition of a status function as binding gives rise to reasons for action' (178) or refraining from action. Burman notes that some social ontologists—prominently Charlotte Witt and Sally Haslanger⁸—have discussed in their work another type of normativity, called 'teleological'. Here is Burman's explanation of how this type of normativity emerges in the social world:

Having imposed this status function [of being a professor] on someone implies that one can *evaluate* how well this person fulfills this status function: is she an excellent, good, or bad professor? The possibility of evaluating people in this way suggests that there is a different type of normativity than deontic in the social world, namely, teleological normativity. (2023: 180)

To further illuminate this notion, Burman refers to sociological research conducted by Beverley Skeggs (1997) based on interviews with British working-class women, many of them housewives. In one of these interviews, a housewife confirms that she perceived herself to fail to meet the ideal of a good housewife in the eyes of a Health Visitor and even herself, where a good housewife in this context is 'someone who has an impeccably clean home, respectable clothes, refined language and shows care and concern for others' (2023: 180-181). This example illustrates how a social norm related to an ideal against which individuals are measured works. One's being perceived as living up to the ideal means that one is perceived as a good instance of that kind (e.g. a housewife), while one's being perceived as not living up to the ideal means that one is perceived of as a bad instance of that kind. Burman helpfully clarifies that the norm of the ideal of housewife is not a *deontic* one because

the Health Visitor does have the *right* to visit the home, but she does not have the right to visit an impeccably clean home. Meanwhile, the interviewee does not have an *obligation* to have an impeccably clean home. (182)

⁸ Burman's (2023) view of teleological normativity explicitly draws on Haslanger's work on gender norms (see mainly Haslanger 2012: 35-82) and Witt's work on gender and social normativity (see mainly Witt 2011).

This norm, for Burman, is teleological. While deontic normativity ‘concerns what we can demand of each other’, ‘teleological normativity concerns ideals that we (sometimes) try to live up to and others expect us to live up to’ (ibid.). To further clarify, Burman acknowledges that being a housewife is partly defined by certain enablements and constraints—for instance, housewives as such might have the right to certain governmental benefits, and they have an obligation to pay taxes on their benefits and take care of their children. Yet Burman suggests that ‘some functions of being a housewife ... are defined in terms of a purpose or goal rather than in terms of rights and obligations’ (ibid.), which is why there exists an ideal that allows us to measure how well a person lives up to this purpose or goal’.

Burman makes it clear that, when it comes to teleological normativity, it is *other people’s* perception or recognition that matters. Once others perceive a person as having a particular social role, the person becomes evaluable under a norm or ideal that they share related to that role, whether or not the evaluated person accepts the norm or ideal (cf. 186).⁹ Importantly, as deontic normativity, teleological normativity provides reasons for actions. For example, if a housewife accepts the ideal of housewife used to assess herself, she will feel that she *ought to* conform to it (cf. 182 and 184).¹⁰

Before continuing, we want to clear up a possible source of confusion. In the first long quotation of this section, Burman claims that once a status function is imposed on an agent, we can evaluate how well the agent fulfils the status function and that this evaluation is made possible by teleological normativity (cf. 189). Burman agrees with Searle that status functions are essentially *deontic* constructions: they are constituted by obligations and rights (cf. Searle 2010: 95). In light of this, Burman’s quotation could be interpreted as meaning that, thanks to deontological normativity, we can evaluate the extent to which an agent fulfils the enablements and constraints that characterise a status function. This is not what Burman means. Her discussion of the housewife case indicates that the evaluations involving teleological normativity concern how well an agent fulfils goals and purposes that do *not* necessarily include satisfying enablements and constraints. That example points to the existence of a facet of normativity that, although it intersects with deontic normativity, constitutes a distinct conceptual dimension.

Burman (2023) offers another example about the status function of being a professor, which can help us better understand what she has in mind. She notes that

a professor might experience a conflict between the telic and the deontic aspects of her status function as professor. She might experience a conflict between her deontic powers, such as administrative obligations, and standards of excellence or ideals connected to the status function of being a professor, such as publishing high-quality work beyond what is strictly required. (184-185)

An important difference between the example of the housewife and the example of the professor is that in the latter, but not in the former, evaluation based on teleological normativity is described as something that can concern how well an agent—a professor—fulfils goals that *include* the satisfaction of obligations (or constraints). In particular, an obligation for the professor as professor is certainly to publish research work. Hence, the

⁹ Burman emphasises that even if we detest this norm or ideal and protest against it, we are still responsive to it and evaluable under it.

¹⁰ Burman also observes that ‘if an agent recognizes but opposes a certain ideal, it might generate reasons for action in opposition to the ideal’ (2023: 185, note 4). This is correct, but we observe that in this case the action could not be explained as a *direct* effect of teleological normativity.

professor could not be judged to satisfy the ideal of excellence of publishing high-quality research work if she did not *also* satisfy an obligation. Note, however, that in this case, as in the case of the housewife, the ideal that gives rise to teleological normativity is not defined in terms of the rights and obligations that constitute a status function. Instead, that ideal involves goals that go beyond them—publishing *high-quality* research work goes beyond mere publishing research work.

In sum, what Burman wants to tell us is that the obligations and rights of status functions are typically *combined with* certain goals and purposes that make teleological evaluation possible, but which are *not reducible to the fulfilment of these obligations and rights*.

This thesis seems plausible at first glance, but why? Since Burman is silent on this, we venture to sketch an explanation. A relatively uncontroversial principle in social ontology—shared by ideal and non-ideal social ontologists and Burman herself (cf. 2023: 106-107)—says that the most basic social entities, which include status functions, are *reflexive*. This means that they exist because (among the satisfaction of other conditions) *they are collectively believed to exist*. Thus, status functions are normally accompanied by beliefs about their existence. Now consider two things: first, for many human beings it is virtually impossible to believe that something exists without wondering why it exists or—more generally—without trying to make sense of it. Also, consider that status functions emerge to serve particular social purposes. They shape and orient social practices: they resolve coordination problems, foster cooperation and integration, help distribute information and resources, and so on (cf. Searle 2010: 58-59). In light of all this, it is plausible to think that the beliefs that accompany status functions and try to make sense of them normally involve a reflection on the purposes of these functions. Once these purposes are identified (which is always, in part, a matter of interpretation of social practices), it is possible to conceive of worse and better ways to satisfy these goals. The better ways correspond to the *ideal* goals that typically exceed what is required by the enablements and constraints of the status functions.

Reflecting on the purposes of a status function might lead people to modify the status function itself to better satisfy these goals (cf. Roversi 2021). But things can go the other way around too. One notable feature of certain status functions is that they trigger a continuous reconfiguration of their goals. Alistair MacIntyre (1980) gives a helpful illustration of this point by focusing on what we could identify as the status function of being a Jew. He writes that if ‘I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew’ (62). This means that being a Jew involves constantly reassessing and revising the ideal of being a Jew. In some instances, changes in status functions or their constitutive goals may be driven by groups in power to maintain their dominance. In these cases, the teleological dimension will be articulated in ideologies functional to cover forms of injustice.¹¹ Norms and ideals of gender roles can for example serve to legitimise a hierarchical and oppressive distribution of tasks embedded in status functions.¹² This suggests one important reason why, from a moral or political perspective, it is important to bring teleological normativity into the open. As we will shortly see, however, Burman does not explore how ideals can be used to calibrate status functions or vice versa or how ideology can manipulate both, as she concentrates on how social power is directly exercised over individuals rather than social structures or ideals.

¹¹ See for example Haslanger (2017).

¹² For instance, an ideal of femininity as weakness and irrationality can be used to legitimate subordination.

3. Telic Power

Although Burman draws on the work of other scholars in analysing deontological normativity, her conception of telic power is utterly original. Burman reminds us that deontic power works through the agents' perceiving that, due to deontic normativity, they *ought to* perform a certain action as a result of recognising a status function—in other words, this recognition gives the agents a reason to act. She suggests that telic power works 'through agents' perceiving a different kind of ought (teleological normativity) related to an ideal' (188), where this ought 'involves a coercive dimension ... as well as a certain kind of "pull-effect" in the sense that agents strive to fulfil some of the ideals they embrace' (188). We understand that the coercive dimension refers to the different types of sanctions—'ranging from strange looks to ostracism' (184)—that an agent would incur if they did not conform to the relevant norms. For Burman, telic power is a form of *social* power essentially because it requires the existence of a *shared* norm or ideal in the relevant community, and because it is the judgment of *other* people that is partly constitutive of an agent's telic power (cf. 188-189). Burman defines telic power in general as follows:

TELIC POWER: An agent A has telic power in a domain if and only if there exists an ideal such that agent A can be measured against it and the distance perceived by other agents of A from the ideal affects A's ability to effect certain outcomes in that domain. (191, edited)

Burman's intuition seems to be that if A has telic power, this power *increases* with A's perceived *closeness* to the ideal, which has the effect of enhancing some of A's abilities, while it *decreases* with A's perceived *distance* from the ideal, which has the effect of restricting some of A's abilities. This is suggested by the following two additional characterisations put forward by Burman:

POSITIVE TELIC POWER: An agent A has positive telic power in a domain if and only if agent A is perceived by other agents as living up to the ideal, as a good exemplar of the relevant kind, and this positively affects or enhances A's ability to effect certain outcomes in that domain.

NEGATIVE TELIC POWER: An agent A has negative telic power in a domain if and only if agent A is perceived by other agents as not living up to the ideal; she is viewed as substandard or as a bad exemplar of the relevant kind, and this negatively affects or restricts A's ability to effect certain outcomes in that domain. (191, edited)

To illustrate these concepts, let us consider the example of the housewife again. If the housewife were perceived to be far from fulfilling the housewife ideal, the Health Visitor's evaluation could have a negative influence on the process aiming to determine whether the housewife should be allowed to keep custody of her children. (Let us suppose that the housewife is undergoing this process.) So, her actions could end up being restricted by preventing her from retaining custody of her children. If this happened or were to happen, the housewife would have negative telic power. On the other hand, if the housewife were perceived as close to fulfilling the housewife ideal, the Health Visitor's judgement could have a positive influence on the process aiming to determine whether she should be given back the custody of her children. If this happened or were to happen, the housewife would have positive telic power (cf. 189). As Burman points out, in cases like these, the agent's telic power impacts, negatively or positively, the agent's deontic power.

Note that the above three definitions all refer to single *domains*. This is so because A's *positive* telic power in one context might end up restricting, rather than enhancing, A's ability to produce certain outcomes in another context, and A's negative telic power in one context might end up enhancing, rather than restricting, A's ability to effect certain outcomes in another. Burman imagines, for instance, the case of Quentin, who is simultaneously a bodybuilder and a hard-working quantum physicist. In the domain of his gym, Quentin is viewed as an exemplar of the masculinity ideal shared among his gym peers. Consequently, he is elected a board member of the gym. In this domain, Quentin has positive telic power. However, in the academic domain, Quentin is not being selected as department chair because this same masculinity ideal conflicts with the quantum physicist ideal (cf. 190).

Burman holds that telic power is transparent, as it is based on ideals and norms that the community explicitly shares and overtly uses, and works through the perceptions of normative reasons (cf. 2023: 214). We saw in Sect. 1 that social power can be intended to be a relation in which one or more individuals are subject to the agency of another or more individuals. Do Burman's definitions of telic power involve agential relations of this type? We think that the only relation of this type implicitly presupposed in these definitions holds between 'other agents' and A. Consider TELIC POWER for instance. It states that there is telic power if 'the distance perceived by other agents of A from the ideal affects A's ability to effect certain outcomes'. We understand that Burman means that there is telic power if the distance perceived by other agents of A from the ideal *gives these other agents a reason to affect* A's ability to produce certain outcomes. Considering this, we find a bit confusing Burman's attribution of telic power to A rather than the other agents who intentionally act on A. One reply might be that in Burman's definitions, A also impacts the perception or judgment of the other agents about A's distance from the ideal (it is A's features that are judged), and thus these agents' ensuing actions. This observation is correct; however, note that A's impact on the judgment of the other agents is not thought of as an intentional exercise of A's agency.¹³ So, it would be inappropriate to conclude that whenever A has telic power, according to Burman's definitions, A has power over the other agents.

Burman convincingly argues through various examples that her notion of telic power captures important aspects of the social world. Let us consider the first of these examples. Invoking negative and positive telic power can for instance explain the fact that, about three decades ago, a female applicant for a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Medical Research Council in Sweden had to be 2.5 times more productive than the average male applicant to receive the same competence score. Clearly, the Medical Research Council members did not have an *obligation* to give competence scores based on gender. So, appealing to deontic power is not helpful to explain this fact. The explanation that invokes telic power is based on the plausible assumption that the shared *ideal* of researcher among the members of the Medical Research Council was male (cf. 193-194).¹⁴ In this case, as in the housewife cases, the telic power of the agents—i.e. the applicants—impacted negatively or positively their deontic powers—negatively for females and positively for males.

¹³ It might be in certain cases.

¹⁴ Although we find Burman's explanation plausible, one possible objection could be that this fact actually depended on an *implicit* gender bias. This would be an incompatible explanation because implicit bias is unconscious, whereas Burman claims that the exercise of telic power depends on appealing to openly used ideals. This observation also indicates that, contrary to what Searle (2010) suggests, Burman's telic power and what Searle calls 'background power' are not similar. Background power, for Searle, provides uncoded constraints on 'social, sexual, verbal, and other forms of behaviour. [So, it largely determines] what is regarded as an appropriate thing to say in a conversation, what is regarded as appropriate dress, what is regarded as permissible sexual behavior, what is regarded as permissible political and moral opinions' (2010: 155). A crucial difference between telic power and background power is that only the latter but not the former normally acts unconsciously (cf. 2010: 31).

Interestingly, Burman also suggests that this type of interaction between telic power and deontic power can clarify certain *feedback loops* typical of the social dimension. In particular, it is plausible that the original negative telic power of female applicants and the original positive telic power of male applicants were reinforced by the unbalanced upshots of these academic competitions. For the gender of those who are known to receive more research fellowships certainly contributes to characterising the collective ideal of researcher (cf. 195).

4. Burman on telic power and deontic power

Burman insists that ‘there are key differences that make clear that telic power is distinct from deontic power’ (191). She makes a few arguments that aim to identify various senses in which telic power and deontic power differ. One of these arguments aims at the strong conclusion that telic power can exist in the absence of deontic power. While we find some of Burman’s arguments straightforward, others do not convince us. In particular, we doubt that telic power and deontic power can exist separately. Let us start by analysing Burman’s case for this conclusion.

Burman contends that since telic power requires only ideals that work as social norms but no status function to exist, it can exist without deontic power (cf. 192).¹⁵ It is worth emphasising that Searle (2010: 23) takes the concept of status function and that of institutional fact as coextensive, and so Burman appears to do. Hence, whenever Burman speaks of status functions, she refers to structures of enablements and constraints that can exist only within institutional contexts. Why does Burman think that telic power can exist without status functions and institutions? She claims that this is true because (1) we can ‘imagine, for instance, a society with only ideals but no institutional rights and obligations’. Further evidence would also be that (2) ‘there can be non-institutional social statuses displaying teleological normativity and telic power’. In particular, according to Burman, (3) in Western liberal democracies¹⁶ ‘there are no institutional rights and obligations attached to the social role of being a woman or a man, but there are certainly ideals of femininity and masculinity’ (192). We disagree with Burman on all of these three points.

Firstly, (3) appears false to us. In Western liberal democracies there are ideals of femininity and masculinity, but women and men are also subject to institutional constraints and enablements that depend on these ideals. Here are two examples: Women and Men can only participate in separate sports competitions—these institutional constraints depend, at least in part, on the assumption that men are physically stronger than women, which is a component of the ideals of femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, maternity and paternity leave rights identify institutional enablements for women and men as such—this differentiation hinges, at least in part, on the different ideal roles of women and men in raising children.

Burman uses (3), which seems false, to support (2). Could (2) be independently true, nevertheless? Can there be *non-institutional* social statuses displaying teleological normativity and telic power? We think so, but we doubt that this fact alone shows that telic power can exist without deontic power. Following Searle (1995: 114 and 2010: 10), Burman

¹⁵ Garcia-Godinez (2023) finds this conclusion incoherent with Burman’s claim that ‘once we have imposed a [status] function on someone or something [...] it becomes possible to evaluate that person or thing according to a standard’ (Burman 2023: 189), which Garcia-Godinez interprets as ‘once we have imposed a status function, there is telic power’. Burman makes this claim again and again in her book. However, we see no incoherence here, for Burman’s last quotation states a *sufficient* condition for the existence of telic power (or at least teleological normativity), and not a necessary condition for it.

¹⁶ Burman (2023: 192) writes ‘in our context’. We interpret this expression as ‘in Western liberal democracies’.

intends ‘institution’ as a system of constitutive rules (cf. 2023: 192, note 8).¹⁷ Searle (1995: 88 and 2010: 91) maintains that the existence of institutional facts, and thus institutions and status functions, requires the existence of constitutive rules that have been codified (e.g. into explicit laws), or that are at least codifiable. Searle generously includes among the latter those that, in his opinion, are at the basis of social phenomena such as friendship, dates, and cocktail parties. He emphasises that

[s]uch institutional patterns could be codified if it mattered tremendously whether or not something was really a cocktail party or only a tea party. If the rights and duties of friendship suddenly became a matter of some grave legal or moral question, then we might imagine these informal institutions becoming codified explicitly. (1995: 88).

However, Searle tends not to include among proper institutions the referents of expressions such as ‘nerd’, ‘intellectual’ and ‘celebrity’, which also individuate social facts (cf. 89, see also Searle 2010: 92). Searle nevertheless concedes that there is a gradual transition, and not a sharp dividing line, between social facts in general—requiring collective intentionality but not necessarily codified or codifiable constitutive rules—and the special subclass of institutional facts. Since Burman adopts Searle’s notion of institution, when she states that there can be non-institutional social statuses that exhibit teleological normativity and telic power, she possibly thinks of statuses such as being a nerd, an intellectual or a celebrity.

Although we agree that these statuses are not institutions and that are associated with ideals of these types of persons, we doubt they involve no deontic normativity and power. For instance, in some public contexts, intellectuals are often *entitled* to express their opinion on issues taken to be culturally or socially relevant, and are *committed* to knowing and having an opinion about certain facts considered important in their culture or society. One plausible way to make sense of the claim that social roles of this type are not institutions, though informed by deontic normativity, is to maintain that they rest on *unstable* constitutive rules—that is to say, rules that are often re-negotiated in our social practices, both in time and across the different social contexts.¹⁸ If this is correct, these social statuses can be defined by *unstable* constraints and enablements, which are nevertheless constraints and enablements. These social roles involve, therefore, forms of *non-institutional* deontic normativity and power. To defend Burman, one could perhaps insist that the sphere of deontic normativity needs to be limited to the institutional domain, but without independent reasons in support of this claim—which we struggle to find—this move would simply be ad hoc.

Let us turn to (1). Burman claims that we can imagine a society with only ideals—that is, with only telic power—but no institutional rights and obligations. Can we really imagine it? We are not sure. It is worth noting that the most insightful and convincing examples of the existence of telic power provided by Burman (2023)—namely, the housewife case, Quentin case, and the Medical Research Council case—do not help us answer this question affirmatively. For these examples always involve an agent A who has *institutional rights and obligations*. These are all examples in which the distance perceived by other agents of A from

¹⁷ Constitutive rules constitute (and regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules. Think, for example, of the rules constitutive of chess: playing chess is constituted in part by acting in accordance with these rules. For Searle, the general form of constitutive rules is ‘X counts as Y in context C’. For instance, performing such and such speech acts (X) counts as getting married (Y) in front of a presiding official (C).

¹⁸ An example could concern the historical renegotiation of the constraints and enablements of the role of intellectual made by Antonio Gramsci within the Marxist tradition. He for example expanded the category of intellectual to include all those who have the status function to communicate with and educate ordinary people. Gramsci argued that revolutionary intellectuals must work not only in academia but also in the media because these are channels to be used to raise consciousness (see for instance Jones 2006: Chap. 6).

the ideal does affect A's ability to produce certain outcomes in the precise sense of limiting or enhancing A's institutional rights and obligations.

But let us suppose we can imagine a society with telic power but no *institutional* rights and obligations. Would this support Burman's thesis that telic power can exist without deontic power? We do not think so. We can probably imagine a very simple society with no institutions. However, it would be impossible to characterise this ensemble of individuals as a society without presupposing that they are involved in some form of collaboration which requires reciprocal commitments towards shared goals. As Burman (2023: 29-30) acknowledges, commitments involve constraints and enablements. In this society, which by assumptions has no institutions, these constraints and enablements would be unstable and informal, but they would still be constraints and enablements. Hence, this society would still have deontic power. In conclusion, we do not find convincing any of the reasons given by Burman for believing that telic power and deontic power have different conditions of existence, and we doubt that convincing reasons could be given to support this thesis.

Let us now turn to Burman's arguments to the effect that telic power and deontic are in other important senses distinct. To begin with, Burman contends that telic power is distinct from deontic power because 'a person can be seen as fulfilling an ideal to a greater or lesser degree: there is a gradual scale'. On the other hand, 'having an institutional right, a positive deontic power, is binary; a person either has the right to receive a salary in virtue of being an employee or does not' (192). We are not convinced by this case either. Note first that fulfilling an ideal to some degree is not just having telic power. Burman maintains that an agent A has telic power if and only if in virtue of A's being perceived by others as satisfying an ideal to a certain degree, A has her own ability to effect certain outcomes enhanced or reduced. So, fulfilling an ideal to a certain degree is just *one* condition that A must satisfy to have telic power. Our best interpretation of Burman's claim is, therefore, that while one condition necessary to have telic power depends on achieving a certain degree on a given scale, no condition necessary to have deontic power depends on achieving a certain degree on a given scale. However, this does not seem to be true: for example, having a sufficiently high salary is normally a necessary condition for paying a given amount of income tax. Being liable to pay income tax seems to be a (negative) deontic power.

Burman's second argument to show that telic power is distinct from deontic power adduces the possibility of an 'ought-remainder'. Consider again the example of the professor who has fulfilled all her institutional obligations but still believes that she ought to do more to satisfy standards of excellence or ideals related to her role as professor. As we have seen, Burman contends that it is *this* type of teleological ought—which depends on an ideal and cannot be reduced to a deontic ought—that essentially characterises telic power (cf. 2023: 192). Given that the kind of normativity that characterises telic power cannot be reduced to the one that characterises deontic power, there is good reason to consider these two types of power as different. We find this argument straightforward.

5. *Two key differences between telic power and deontic power*

We have seen that telic power is different from deontic power at least because it essentially depends on a form of normativity that is not reducible to deontic normativity. Are there other important differences between telic power and deontic power that have not been highlighted or sufficiently highlighted by Burman? We think there are at least two more.

The first difference, which is not explicitly mentioned in Burman (2023), is the following: as we have seen in Sect 1, deontic power cannot act through mere coercion—e.g., threat of violence or psychological pressure. Instead, it always requires a mutual recognition

of the status functions of the interacting agents and, therefore, an acceptance of the relevant constraints and enablements.¹⁹ This is why whenever deontic power directly explains agents' actions, there must be acceptance. On the other hand, Burman (2023) does not appear to hold that telic power, in general, requires acceptance. Her definitions of telic powers state that an agent A has telic power when the judgement of other agents about the distance of A from the ideal ends up affecting A's ability to produce certain outcomes. This can happen in situations where A does not accept that her abilities will be limited because, for example, she does not accept the ideal against which she is judged. It would be implausible to assume, for example, that the women applicants for a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Medical Research Council in Sweden generally accepted an ideal of researcher that sees the latter specifically as a man.

To be accurate, when an agent A does have telic power, there are four different ways in which A can disagree with the other agents who judge her: (i) A can disagree on the type of person the other agents identify her as; (ii) A can disagree on the ideal of that type of person accepted by the other agents; (iii) A can disagree on the judgement of the other agents about her distance from that ideal; (iv) A can disagree on the decision of the other agents that her abilities to produce the relevant outcomes must be affected in that case. These forms of disagreement can be combined with one another. But even if A disagreed with the other agents on all these points, if the agents enhanced or restrained A's ability to produce the relevant outcomes as a result of their assessment of A's distance from the ideal, this would still make A have telic power. Since telic power does not require acceptance, its exercise can be adduced to explain the production of social conflicts, and so to illuminate certain instances of social oppression and injustice. This marks an important difference between telic power and deontic power.²⁰

The second important difference between telic power and deontic power, which is also not mentioned by Burman but has surfaced in the discussion of the former section, concerns the link between telic power and teleological normativity on the one hand, and the link between deontic power and deontic normativity on the other. In short, all domains in which one is subject to deontic normativity are necessarily domains in which one has deontic power, but it is unclear that all domains in which one is subject to teleological normativity are necessarily domains in which one has telic power. To see this, consider first that if an agent A is subject to deontic normativity in a domain D, then A has some status function in D characterised by certain enablements and constraints. (Think, for instance, of A's enablements and constraints that depend on A's status function as a lecturer in academia). The enablements and constraints of A that regulate A's relations with other agents in D *are* the agent's deontic powers in D. This shows that all domains in which one is subject to deontic normativity are domains in which one has deontic power.

Let us now turn to teleological normativity. For Burman, this is the normativity that governs people's judgments about how well or poorly an agent who has a given social role satisfies the shared ideal of that role. Consider an agent A who is subject to teleological normativity in a domain D. Accordingly, it must be the case that, in D, other agents can acknowledge that A has a given social role SR and can judge A's distance from the ideal of

¹⁹ Burman endorses this conception of deontic power. For instance, she writes that some 'forms of social power, such as deontic power, work through agents' perceiving that, due to deontic normativity, they ought to perform a certain action as a result of recognizing a status function' (2023: 188).

²⁰ This does not mean that the production of conflict and contestation can never be explained by invoking deontic power. But in these explanations, the role of deontic power is indirect, since the conflict and contestation will be explained in terms of the *absence* of deontic power. In these cases, it will be argued that some social functions defined in terms of constraints and enablements have not been accepted but contested by some groups because they are perceived as immoral or oppressive. When these social functions are institutionalised and regulated by law, conflict and contestation are exemplified by cases of civil disobedience.

SR collectively accepted in D. (Think for instance of A as an applicant for a postdoctoral fellowship at the Swedish Medical Research Council.) The satisfaction of these conditions alone does not entail that A has telic power in D. For instance, in some domain D in which A is acknowledged to have a social role SR, the judgment of the other agents of A's distance from the shared ideal of SR might perhaps *not* affect A's ability to produce certain outcomes relevant for D. There may also be domains in which A is judged to be *close* to the ideal, but her abilities to produce certain outcomes are affected *negatively*, and domains in which A is judged to be *distant* from the ideal but her abilities to produce certain outcomes are affected *positively*. Let us consider an example of the last case. University students suffering from certain learning disabilities or neurodivergences such as ADHD, dyslexia and form of autism, are perceived by teachers and administrators as far from the ideal of student. However, for this very reason, these students usually have disability provisions such as extra minutes on exams and extended essay deadlines. This means that the abilities of these students to produce certain outcomes are enhanced rather than reduced.²¹ Therefore, although these students are subject to teleological normativity at the university, they do not have telic power (neither positive nor negative) in the very same domain.

It would be important for future work if social ontology is able to illuminate the links that exist between teleological normativity and telic power. In particular, it would be interesting to understand what kinds of contexts in general are such that the existence of teleological normativity in them necessarily or typically translates into the existence of telic power.

6. Conclusions

Burman's introduction of the notion of telic power, distinct from deontic power, into social ontology makes the conceptual tools available to ideal and non-ideal social ontologists more powerful and promissory of analytic progress in this discipline. Burman provided excellent examples of how this notion can be used to analyse different types of social phenomena that conceal or may conceal forms of oppression and injustice. We have suggested that telic power is beneficial to explain how social conflict can break out. Upon scrutiny, however, we have found Burman's sharp distinction between telic and deontic power questionable since telic power and deontic power are conceptually distinct but do not appear to have different conditions of existence. We have also found the relation between teleological normativity and telic power partly opaque and needing further investigation. We want to make clear, however, that our criticisms of Burman's conception of telic power do not affect its innovative potential and theoretical usefulness, nor do they hinder Burman's projects of building a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology.

As suggested in Sect. 4, Burman sees telic and deontic power as ontologically distinct essentially because, following Searle, she does not recognise non-institutional—i.e. uncodifiable—enablements and constraints as members of the sphere of deontic normativity. However, we have suggested that the sphere of deontic normativity in the social world is more inclusive than Burman thinks. According to our conception, which we find less idiosyncratic, social constraints and enablements are generated by the dynamic of mutual responsiveness embedded in social interactions. It is in the nature of the norms underlying these interactions that they tend to be continuously renegotiated to match objectives to be pursued collectively, which also tend to be continuously revised. Only when these norms and

²¹ These measures are specifically intended to counterbalance or neutralise disadvantages that other students do not have. However, this help translates into strengthening the abilities to produce certain outcomes of disadvantaged students.

objectives become sufficiently stable in time and across different contexts do institutions and institutional facts emerge, but this does not mean that there are no constraints or enablements, and therefore no deontic normativity, before this stage. In this picture, the social world includes, to begin with, what we could call ‘plain social functions’. These functions are characterised by uncoded constraints and enablements that are constantly renegotiated; plain social functions instantiate a form of *non-institutional* deontic normativity. These constraints and enablements are associated to goals and ideals which are also frequently adjusted. Hence, plain social functions also display teleological normativity and possibly generate telic power. Some plain social functions may then stabilise and reach the standing of proper status functions, characterised by codified or codifiable constraints and enablements. These functions instantiate *institutional* deontic normativity, teleological normativity and perhaps generate telic power. Clearly, the distinction between plain social functions and status functions is a matter of degree with plenty of borderline cases, rather than a clear-cut distinction. This conception of social normativity allows us to retain Burman’s insights into deontic and telic powers within a framework that appears to us more natural than that presupposed by Burman and Searle and might harmonise with views recently defended by other social ontologists.^{22,23}

References

- Andersson [now Burman], Åsa. 2007. *Power and Social Ontology*. Lund: Bokbox.
- Åsta (2018). *Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brännmark, Johan (2019). Contested Institutional Facts. *Erkenntnis* 84: 1047-1064.
- Burman, Åsa (2023). *Nonideal Social Ontology: The Power View*. Oxford: OUP.
- Garcia-Godinez, Miguel (2023), The ideal in nonideal social ontology. *Analysis* (Advance articles, <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anad041>)
- Guala, Francesco. (2007). The Philosophy of Social Science: Metaphysical and Empirical. *Philosophy Compass* 2: 954-980.
- Haslanger, Sally. (2000). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be? *Noûs* 34: 31-55.
- Haslanger, Sally. (2012). *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haslanger, Sally. (2017). Ideology and Critique. *Aristotelian Society* 91: 149-173.
- Jenkins, Katharine (2023). *Ontological Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press.

²² For example, Brännmark (2019) distinguishes between *formal* social positions, such as being ‘a property owner, a marriage partner, a citizen, a university professor, a medical doctor, and so on’ and *informal* or *implicit* social positions, such as being ‘a friend or a lover, parent or child, leader or advisor, and so on’ (1057). Perhaps some of these informal positions depend on stable rules that *can* be formalised, but it is by no means obvious that this is true of all of them. (A problematic cases may concern, for instance, the social role of leader.) Brännmark contends that the positions of both types are defined in terms of Hohfeldian incidents, which are in turn characterised in terms of deontic concepts such as rights and liabilities—thus, in terms of deontic normativity. Åsta (2018) also distinguishes between deontic normativity characterising institutional roles (such as being a professor or a GP) and a type of normativity characterising non-institutional roles (such as being cool, being a popular singer), which she calls ‘communal properties’. Åsta states that ‘a social property, whether institutional or communal, is fleshed out in terms of the constraints and enablements, institutional or communal, on a person’s behavior and action. To have the status in question *just is* to have the constraints and enablements in question’ (2018: 29).

²³ We are very grateful to Gerry Hough, Sophie Lauwers, Federico Luzzi, Paula Sweeney and Stephan Torre for constructive criticism and comments on earlier drafts of this paper. A special thanks to Eilidh Beaton. A very special thanks to Åsa Burman.

- Jones, Steven (2006). *Antonio Gramsci*. London: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, Alistair (1980). Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. *Boston University Journal* 26:173-178.
- Roversi, Corrado (2021). In defense of constitutive rules. *Synthese* 119: 14349-14370.
- Searle, John R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press.
- Searle, John R. (2010). *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilisation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skeggs, Beverley (1997). *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: Sage Publications.
- Witt, Charlotte (2011). *The Metaphysics of Gender*. New York: Oxford University Press.