

Critique of telic power

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ABSTRACT

Åsa Burman has recently introduced the important notion of telic power and differentiated it from deontic power in an attempt to build a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology. We find Burman's project promising but we argue that more is to be done to make it entirely successful. First, there is a palpable tension between Burman's claim that telic power can be ontologically independent of deontic power and her examples, which suggest that these forms of power share the same basis. Second, it is not completely clear how telic power helps non-ideal social ontologists explain oppression, since Burman thinks that both forms of power are transparent to social agents. We offer solutions to both problems. First, we question the thesis that telic power can exist without deontic power. Burman contends that this is possible because some social roles involving telic power can exist independently of institutions, which are—in her opinion—the source of deontic power. Against Burman, we suggest that all social roles involve deontic power, whether or not they are institutional. Second, we argue that while the exercise of deontic power requires a mutual recognition of the social roles of the interacting agents and, therefore, an acceptance of the associated norms, the exercise of telic power does not require acceptance of the relevant norms. This is why invoking telic power is useful in explaining how oppression and injustice can arise. Lastly, we suggest that the relation between teleological normativity and telic power has not been fully clarified by Burman and requires a deeper analysis.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, mainstream social ontology has been criticised by a growing number of philosophers. What Francesco Guala (2007) calls the 'standard model of social ontology' (SMOSO)—exemplified by the works of Margaret Gilbert, John Searle, and Raimo Tuomela, among others—tends to ground social theorising in the analysis of depoliticised phenomena such as, for example, taking a walk together, organising a picnic,¹ or institutions such as money or being a professor. The type of social ontology that gravitates around the SMOSO is usually called 'ideal social ontology'. This type of social ontology tends to focus on small-scale, egalitarian, cooperative groups or codified institutional roles and abstracts away from the messiness that often characterises social reality. In this way, it typically ignores more conflictual and divisive phenomena, such as those concerning gender, race, or economic classes. This approach results in a partial, if not deceptive, picture of the social world as a predominantly consensual and harmonious domain.

The recent critique of ideal social ontology has been accompanied by novel work in the field that has focused on more conflictual or divisive social phenomena—exemplified by influential papers by Sally Haslanger, Åsta and Katharine Jenkins, among others. This new stream is often dubbed 'non-ideal social ontology'. A central aim of it is to contribute to

¹ These events can provide opportunities for political activities (such as collective deliberation), but they are not inherently political.

understanding and, in some cases, fighting various types of social oppression and injustices, such as racism and sexism.

Although we are very supportive of the approach of non-ideal social ontology, we share Asa Burman's (2023) concern 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: one describing social reality as 'world of constant conflicts in need of a revolution' (p. 3). For this reason, we welcome Burman's (2023) attempt to build a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology to produce a more thorough and objective understanding of social reality.

Burman argues that ideal social ontology has worked with too limited a conception of social power that essentially reduces it to *deontic power*. This 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, authorisations and obligations, or enablements and constraints—think of, for instance, the entitlements and commitments typically attributed to a lecturer or a physician. Burman contends that the sole appeal to deontic normativity cannot capture crucial aspects of non-institutional social roles, such as gender and race, which are pivotal to the analysis of social injustice and oppression. For the normative nature of these social roles depends not on constraints and enablements but on certain shared ideals—for example, those of femininity and masculinity and those of black people and white people. Burman contends that the individuals who have these social roles are subject to the normative force of these ideals in the sense that the distance of them perceived by other agents from these ideals will affect—positively or negatively—their ability to produce certain outcomes in certain domains. The individuals whose abilities are affected in this way are said by Burman to have negative or positive *telic power*. For example, those who are perceived to be closer to the ideal of the white male will typically have positive telic power in many contexts, such as work and education.

In sum, in order to reconcile idealised and non-idealised social ontology, Burman advocates a form of pluralism about social power. She proposes that while deontic power can explain the cooperative and harmonious side of society, telic power can illuminate its more divisive and ethically problematic aspects.²

We find Burman's project promising but we argue that more is to be done to make it fully successful. First, there is a palpable tension between Burman's claim that telic power can be ontologically independent of deontic power and her examples, which suggest that these forms of power share the same basis. Second, it is not completely clear how telic power helps non-ideal social ontologists explain oppression, since Burman thinks that both forms of power are transparent to social agents. We offer solutions to both problems. First, we question the thesis that telic power cannot exist in the absence of deontic power. Burman contends that this is possible because some social roles involving telic power can exist independently of institutions, which are—in her opinion—the source of deontic power. Against Burman, we submit that all social roles involve deontic power, whether or not they are institutional. Second, we argue that while the exercise of deontic power requires a mutual recognition of the social roles of the interacting agents and, therefore, an acceptance of the associated norms, the exercise of telic power does not require acceptance of the relevant norms. This is why invoking telic power is useful in explaining how social oppression and injustice can arise. Lastly, we suggest that the relation between teleological normativity and telic power has not been fully clarified by Burman and requires a deeper analysis.

² To be accurate, Burman's (2023) pluralistic account of social power is richer than this because it also includes what she calls 'spillover power' and 'structural power' (see Chap. 6). Nevertheless, the introduction of telic power is certainly Burman's more original and interesting contribution to this debate.

In more detail, Sect. 2 introduces the notion of deontic power. Sect. 3 analyses Burman's view of teleological normativity. Sect. 4 details Burman's notion of telic power. Sect. 5 criticises Burman's views by investigating the link between telic power and deontic power. Sect. 6 clarifies the role of telic power in the explanation of social injustice and oppression. Sect. 7 concludes the paper by suggesting what should be done next.

2. *Deontic power*

Burman points out that when it comes to social power, the tendency to concentrate on deontic power—proper to ideal social ontologists—goes hand in hand with 'a consensus-oriented view of social phenomena, rather than regarding them in terms of conflict and contestation' (2023: 176). John Searle is one of the most influential theorists of deontic power and the one to whom Burman explicitly constantly refers when considering this notion.

For Searle (2010), agent A has power over 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 it³ (cf.147-148). Within this general understanding of power, social powers—specifically intended by Searle as deontic powers—are the rights and obligations 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 the social roles. Searle conceives of these roles as special functions—called '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. Status functions are collectively assigned to individuals, and they need to be collectively recognised to exist. Examples of status functions 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. 7-11). For instance, a lecturer typically has the right to use an office and the university computer system and the obligation 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. Importantly, deontic powers do not work through physical force, threat of violence or psychological pressure; they instead provide desire-independent *reasons* for action. They get one to do something without using coercion in virtue of one's recognising a status function—one's own status function or someone else's status function.

3. *Teleological normativity*

Burman (2023) suggests that appealing to other forms of social power can allow us to explain important instances of injustice and oppression in the social world. She 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). However, Burman notes that some

³ More accurately, 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.

social ontologists have discussed in their work another type of normativity, called ‘teleological’.⁴ Here is her explanation of how this type of normativity emerges:

Having imposed this status function on someone implies that one can *evaluate* how well this person fulfills this status function: [for example,] 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 clarify this notion, Burman refers to sociological research based on interviews with British working-class women,⁵ 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’ (Burman 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 as a bad instance of that kind. Burman clarifies that the norm of the ideal of a housewife is not *deontic* 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)

This norm 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’ (182). 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 she points out that ‘some functions of being a housewife ... are defined in terms of a purpose or goal rather than in terms of rights and obligations’ (182), which is why there exists an ideal that allows us to measure how well a person lives up to this purpose or goal.

Importantly, when it comes to teleological normativity, it is *other people’s* perception 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 (cf. 186). As deontic normativity, teleological normativity provides reasons for actions. For example, a housewife may feel that she *ought to* conform to the ideal of a housewife used to assess herself (cf. 182 and 184).

Burman offers another example concerning the status function of being a professor. 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

⁴ 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).

⁵ See Skeggs (1997).

connected to the status function of being a professor, such as publishing high-quality work beyond what is strictly required. (184-185)

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. Both examples point to the existence of a facet of normativity that, although it intersects with deontic normativity, constitutes a distinct conceptual dimension. It seems 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.

4. Telic Power

Although Burman draws on the work of other scholars in analysing deontological normativity, her conception of telic power is utterly original. As we saw, deontic power works through the agents' perceiving that, due to deontic normativity, they *ought to* perform a certain action due to recognising a status function. Telic power works 'through agents' perceiving a different kind of ought (teleological normativity) related to an ideal', 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). The coercive dimension here 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.

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 is 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 illustrated 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 negatively influence 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. Alternatively, if the housewife were perceived as close to fulfilling the housewife ideal, the Health Visitor's judgement could positively influence 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). 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 the case of Quentin, who is simultaneously a bodybuilder and a hard-working quantum physicist. In 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 selected as department chair because this same masculinity ideal conflicts with the quantum physicist ideal (cf. 190).

Burman holds that telic power is transparent, based on ideals and norms that the community explicitly shares and overtly uses and works through the perceptions of normative reasons (cf. 2023: 214). Burman convincingly argues through examples that the notion of telic power captures important aspects of the social world. For instance, invoking negative and positive telic power can 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. The Medical Research Council members had no *obligation* to give competence scores based on gender. So, appealing to deontic power is not helpful in explaining this fact. The explanation that invokes telic power is based on the plausible assumption that the shared *ideal* of the researcher among the members of the Medical Research Council was male (cf. 193-194).⁶ 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. Burman also suggests that this 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 the researcher (cf. 195).

⁶ 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. 31).

Burman's notion of telic power appears to be a useful tool to shed light on the phenomena of social injustice and oppression investigated by non-ideal social ontologists and to complement the methodological approach of ideal social ontologists, which tends to hide these phenomena. However, as we will see shortly, Burman's views are not free from internal difficulties and call for further explanation and analysis.

5. *How deontic power and telic power are related*

An initial question concerns Burman's thesis, presupposed in her examples, that the obligations and rights of status functions are typically combined with goals and purposes that make teleological evaluation possible but are not reducible to the fulfilment of those obligations and rights. All this seems plausible at first glance, but why? Since Burman is silent on this, we venture to sketch one possible explanation. (We suggest a different but not incompatible explanation in Sect. 6.) 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 usually 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, 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 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.⁷

To illuminate the link that Burman sees between deontic power and telic power, further issues must be addressed. Burman insists that 'there are key differences that make clear that telic power is distinct from deontic power' (2023: 191) and makes some arguments that aim to identify various senses in which telic power and deontic power differ. While we agree with Burman that telic power and deontic power are distinct in different ways, we reject her strong claim that the first type of power can exist in the absence of the second.

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'. Consequently, it makes sense to speak of stronger or weaker telic power—that is, to conceive of telic power as a *scalar* property. 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, our emphasis). We find this argument straightforward. To show that telic power differs from deontic power, Burman also adduces

⁷ 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 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.

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 a 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. Again, all this looks straightforward to us.

Burman also argues 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). Garcia-Godinez (2023) notices that this conclusion looks *prima facie* incoherent with what Burman’s examples aim to show. Think again of the examples of the housewife and the professor. What they aim to show is that—to use Burman’s (2023) own words—‘once we have imposed a [status] function on someone or something ... it becomes possible to evaluate that person or thing according to a standard’ (189). This means that once a status function is imposed, there is deontic power, and therefore, there is also telic power. Burman makes this claim again and again in her book. A quick way to dismiss this difficulty as merely apparent would be to insist that Burman’s last quote states only a *sufficient* condition for the existence of telic power (or at least teleological normativity) and not a necessary condition for it. Yet the problems run deeper than this, as Burman’s claim that telic power can exist without deontic power appears questionable in itself. The very fact that she relies on examples like those described suggests that it is hard to think of cases in which telic power is disconnected from deontic power.

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 democracies⁸ ‘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 some 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 intends ‘institution’ as a system of constitutive rules (cf. 2023: 192, note 8).⁹ Searle (1995: 88

⁸ Burman (2023: 192) writes ‘in our context’. We interpret this expression as ‘in Western liberal democracies’.

⁹ 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

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.¹⁰

Although we agree that these statuses are not institutions and that are associated with ideals of these types of persons, we doubt they do not involve deontic normativity and power whatsoever. For example, in certain public contexts, intellectuals are often *entitled* to express their opinion on issues taken to be culturally or socially relevant; in these or other contexts, intellectuals are also taken to be *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 somewhat informed by deontic normativity, is to maintain that they rest on *unstable* constitutive rules. 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.

According to this conception, 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.¹¹ Only when these norms and objectives become sufficiently clear and 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. This conception of social normativity allows us to retain Burman’s insights into

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).

¹⁰ In Anderson (2007: 73), Burman considers the case of so-called ‘honorific powers’ (such as being a knight, an honorary doctor, or a beauty queen), which depend on degenerate status functions, where status is valued for its own sake. Despite their name, honorific powers do not confer on their possessor any real deontic power. Although honorific powers may display teleological normativity, Burman makes it clear that they are best conceptualised as *institutional* facts.

¹¹ 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).

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.¹²

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 agent A, who has *institutional rights and obligations*. These are all examples in which the distance perceived by other agents of A from 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 assumption 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.

To conclude, Burman has offered no convincing reason for believing that telic power and deontic power have different conditions of existence. Ironically, this is good news for Burman's project of finding an approach to social phenomena that stays away from the extremes of ideal and non-ideal social ontology. In fact, note that if telic power cannot be completely disentangled from deontic power, since the latter requires the existence of some type of recognition and cooperation, any social context in which telic power creates injustice and oppression should also accommodate a certain level of recognition and cooperation. Consequently, social reality cannot just be a 'world of constant conflicts in need of a revolution'.

6. The explanatory role of telic power

Burman (2023) contends that *opaque* power can be an effective source of injustice and oppression. Indeed, unjust and oppressive social structures can more easily be imposed on people when the power that creates them is not transparent: that is, its operation is not

¹² 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 case 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. Ásta (2018) also distinguishes between deontic normativity characterising institutional roles (such as being a professor or a physician) and a type of normativity characterising non-institutional roles (such as being cool, being a popular singer), which she calls 'communal properties'. Ásta 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).

discoverable through mere reflection and observation at a micro level (cf. 220-225).¹³ However, this cannot be how telic power works according to Burman, for she is very clear that telic power is *transparent* just as deontic power (cf. 214). But then, why should we follow Burman in holding that telic power, unlike deontic power, can be a major source of harmful social effects? We submit that telic power can be such a source because, unlike deontic power, it does not require the agent to accept the norms it depends on. This is to be interpreted in two senses: first, the agent can have telic power—particularly, negative telic power—even if she *opposes* these norms. Second, the agent can be guided by teleological normativity even if she *does not accept* the relevant norms but follows them unreflectively. Let us consider both senses in turn.

An important difference between deontic power and telic power, which is not emphasised in Burman (2023), is as follows: as we have seen, 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, the acceptance of the relevant constraints and enablements.¹⁴ This is why there must be some level of acceptance whenever deontic power directly explains agents' actions. On the other hand, Burman (2023) does not hold that telic power generally requires the acceptance of the relevant role ideals. Her definitions of telic powers state that 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 well happen when A does not acknowledge that her abilities should be limited because she opposes 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 shared an ideal of the researcher that sees the latter specifically as a man. Presumably, many of the women applicants opposed such an ideal. This means that the application of telic power can involve some type of coercion.

To be accurate, when 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. 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 these types of acceptance, its exercise can be invoked to explain the production of conflict between those who limit the abilities of the members of a group (or agree they should be limited) and the group itself. This can illuminate the origin of important instances of social oppression and injustice.

Let us now turn to the second sense in which telic power does not require acceptance. This explanation appeals to the notion of habituation¹⁵ and suggests a second reason why telic power can be a source of injustice and oppression. Earlier in this paper, we have proposed that the rights and obligations definitive of status functions are typically combined

¹³ An important form of opaque power is what Burman calls 'structural power'.

¹⁴ Burman does endorse 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).

¹⁵ Interestingly, Witt's more recent work (see Witt 2023) develops a theory of social normativity based on Aristotle's artisan model that crucially exploits the notion of habituation. However, Witt's theory does not include an explanation like ours.

with role ideals because of people's tendency to reflect on the purposes of these functions and conceive of worse and better ways to satisfy them. We think that social roles are typically associated with role ideals even when this type of reflection is minimal or absent. Our explanation applies to all social roles but proves particularly illuminating when we focus on those, such as gender and race, that are typically not institutionalised, in the sense that their status functions include only rudimentary or unstable constraints and enablements. It is true that, despite this lack of deontic structure, the individuals who fill these roles typically possess, by virtue of their roles, quite complex patterns of reasons for acting. (Think about the implications of the ideal of man or woman on codes of conduct in many societies.) The normative pull that these individuals perceive to act in certain ways, in this case, depends on the standards against which the actions of these role occupants are socially evaluated. This is possible because these standards have been interiorised by the role occupants. We suggest that habituation is the basic process through which this type of interiorisation takes place. Through habituation, agents learn—typically by imitation of exemplars and other indirect forms of teaching—routinised, sedimented, shared and culturally shaped ways of doing things and forms of know-how. This learning activity begins at an early age and is mostly passive and largely uncritical, in the sense that the learner is led by other social actors to identify certain normative patterns of behaviour and role ideals and to interiorise them without explicitly reflecting on their appropriateness.¹⁶ The result is that habituation sets normative standards in the mind of social agents without requiring substantive self-reflection and, therefore, explicit acceptance of these standards. This is why the functioning of teleological normativity, unlike that of deontic normativity, does not require acceptance.

Consider now an oppressive social role—for example, the one of women in a male-controlled society. As long as mere habituation is how the women of this society interiorise role ideals, as women, they will be subject to oppression.¹⁷ It would be difficult for them to perceive the oppressive standards and initiate forms of rebellion and protest because the internalisation of the woman ideal would not require an acceptance of this ideal. If our explanation is correct, and we want to know more about how unjust social arrangements can be produced and maintained, we should look more into teleological normativity. This form of normativity can lead people to follow standards that only upon reflection they might reject.

7. What should be done next

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. Although Burman's thesis that telic power and deontic power have different conditions of existence is doubtful, we have clarified why telic power is beneficial in explaining how social injustice and oppression can be generated. Burman has provided excellent examples of how this notion can be used in this sense. Looking to the future, we draw attention to the fact that the relation between telic power and teleological normativity has remained partly opaque in Burman's work and, therefore, requires further investigation. Before concluding, let us briefly consider this matter.

There is an important difference between telic power and deontic power, not mentioned by Burman, which has arisen in the discussion of the previous sections. This difference concerns the link between telic power and teleological normativity on the one

¹⁶ In light of, for instance, the consideration of a broader social, political and ethical context, or of the different interests and abilities of the learner herself.

¹⁷ Regardless of whether, as women, they have positive telic power in some contexts and negative telic power in others.

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 seems false that all domains in which one is subject to teleological normativity are necessarily domains in which one has telic power.

To see this, first consider that if agent A is subject to deontic normativity in 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 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 neurodivergence, such as ADHD, dyslexia and forms 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.¹⁸ 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 were 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.¹⁹

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¹⁸ 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.

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