

EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF SEARLE'S THEORY OF SOCIAL REALITY - HOW TO ACCOUNT FOR OPAQUE SOCIAL PHENOMENA LIKE POWER STRUCTURES

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Abstract

I argue that the scope of Searle's theory is wider than previously acknowledged. Critics object that the scope of the theory is too narrow since it cannot account for opaque kinds of social facts due to the self-referentiality of social concepts. Using the distinction between a macro-level and a micro-level, I show that it can in fact account for opaque social phenomena like power structures and inflation: opaque kinds of social facts (macro phenomena) can be reduced to self-referential and transparent institutional facts (micro phenomena). Hence, opaque social phenomena can be taken into account, while still keeping the self-referentiality.

Introduction: Social ontology - the foundation of the social sciences?

Leading philosophers in the field of social ontology claim that social ontology is the foundation of the social sciences and political philosophy (cf. Gilbert, 1989; Searle 1995).¹ I investigate the plausibility of this claim by discussing the *scope* of John Searle's theory put forward in *The construction of social reality* (1995). Contrary to many critics who argue that the theory is too narrow, I will argue that the scope of Searle's the theory is much wider than previously

- 1 Margaret Gilbert writes of the concepts she discusses in her book *On social facts*: "In that sense they will be foundational concepts of social sciences. This is by no means an unimportant sense. For the concepts which are accepted as foundational in this sense give direction to subsequent enquiry in a given discipline." ([1989], 1992, 8). John Searle writes of the questions he is about to discuss in *The construction of social reality*: "Because these questions concern what might be thought of as problems in the foundations of the social sciences, one might suppose that they would have been addressed and solved already in the various social sciences..." (1995, xii). To make the 'foundation claim' clearer, consider a central question in political philosophy: What is social justice? That is, how are we to organize our institutions in a just way? Before answering this question, there is a prior question, namely, a question in social ontology: What is an institution? Social ontology is prior to the normative questions of political philosophy and prior to explanations in the social sciences in the sense that it presupposes an *understanding* of the phenomena that are to be evaluated. For discussion on the implications of social ontology for explanations in the social sciences, see Searle (1991) and for further statements about the foundation claim, see Searle. (2001, 37)

acknowledged. Thus, the claim that social ontology is the foundation of the social sciences will be made more plausible.

Critics object that Searle's theory cannot capture central phenomena of the social world, such as norms, 'invisible' power structures, certain economic phenomena like recessions, and economic classes.² For instance, Hubert Dreyfus (1999) argues that social norms fall in between social and institutional facts on Searle's account and thus fall outside the theory. Amie L. Thomasson (2003) argues that epistemically and conceptually opaque entities, e.g. power structures and recessions, cannot be taken into account due to the self-referentiality of social concepts, while others claim that the theory cannot include economic classes due to the intentionalistic perspective presupposed in Searle's account of social groups.

If these objections can be answered adequately, the scope of the theory is larger than previously acknowledged, but if not, the theory is rather limited and the 'foundation claim' is put into question. Furthermore, Searle aims at constructing a general theory of the social world.³ If the objections cannot be answered, it would also show that one needs more or different theoretical tools in order to build a *general* theory of social reality. Hence, the question: How much of social reality can Searle's theory capture?

I focus on Thomasson's objection since I regard it as one of the most important objections due to the pervasiveness of power structures in society. One cannot understand the nature of society without understanding the place and role of power structures. Furthermore, different power structures are a topic of great concern and play an important role in explanations in the social sciences and political philosophy. For instance, consider the statement: 'class and gender affect life chances.' The idea is that individuals with the same abilities will have different life chances, e.g. in achieving career goals, depending on their gender and/or the income class they are born into. A plausible explanation is that there are more or less hidden power structures in societies such as a class structure and/or a gender structure that affect the life chances of individuals. That is, there are more or less hidden discriminatory mechanisms that we often only see the results of.

I will argue that Searle's theory can in fact account for these kinds of power structures as well as economic phenomena like inflation and recession. I begin

2 Thomasson uses the term 'power structure' while I prefer the term 'social structure' for reasons given in my *Power and social ontology* (2007). However, I will use the term 'power structure' here since I focus on Thomasson's objection.

3 John R. Searle, Lecture in "The philosophy of social science", University of California, Berkeley, fall 2004.

by discussing Thomasson's central objection that Searle's theory cannot capture conceptually and epistemically opaque entities due to the self-referentiality of social concepts. Thereafter, I discuss the consequences of giving up the self-referentiality of social concepts and conclude that a solution to the objection must *preserve this self-referentiality*. I suggest three other conditions of adequacy for an answer to Thomasson's objection; it must *locate* power structures in the theory, show that power structures are *ontologically dependent* on institutional facts, and explain how there can be *discoveries* in the social sciences. I respond to Thomasson's objection by reducing the macro-level (power structures) to the micro-level (institutional facts) and argue that this solution meets the four conditions of adequacy.

Searle's theory of social reality

Searle's aim is to develop a theory of the ontology of social reality, i.e. a theory about how social institutions, social facts, and institutional facts, exist. He attempts to explain the general structure of social reality by using the tools developed in *Speech Acts* and *Intentionality* (Searle 1969; 1983). Central questions are: How do we create an objective social and institutional reality? How are institutional facts *possible* and what is the *nature* of such facts?

To anticipate a bit, the answer will be that we create an objective institutional reality by collectively imposing functions on objects or phenomena, according to the structure of constitutive rules, where the functions imposed exceed the purely physical features of the phenomena. And the answer to the question 'what *is* an institutional fact?' will be: "The class of existing status functions is identical with the class of institutional facts." (Searle, 1995, 124).

To understand these claims, three notions; collective intentionality, imposition of function, constitutive rules, need to be explained. Searle makes a strong claim, namely, that these notions are jointly necessary and sufficient to account for social and institutional reality.⁴

According to Searle, intentionality refers to the capacity of the mind/brain to relate to the world, that is, to be directed at, or to be about, something beyond itself, that is, objects or states of affairs in the world. The mind relates

4 There are different types of facts in this ontology. Brute facts require no institutions for their existence, social facts are any facts that involve collective intentionality, and institutional facts require institutions for their existence. For instance, the existence of a mountain is a brute fact, two people going for a walk together is a social fact, and the existence of money is an institutional fact.

to the world by way of intentional states. An intentional state is any state that is directed at something beyond itself, for instance, beliefs, hopes, fears, and desires. (Searle, 1983). Searle argues that in addition to singular intentionality, i.e. intentionality of the form ‘I believe’, there is collective intentionality, i.e. intentionality of the form ‘we believe’. That is, Searle claims that collective intentionality is a primitive notion, which means that it cannot be reduced to individual intentionality and mutual beliefs. Collective intentionality means engaging in cooperative behavior and sharing intentional states, that is, a sense of doing something together. (Searle, 1995, 23).⁵ “Obvious examples are cases where *I* am doing something as part of *our* doing something. [...] If I am a violinist in an orchestra I play *my* part in *our* performance of the symphony.” (Ibid.).

Human beings have the capacity to impose functions on objects. For instance, we can impose the function of being a bench on a log, which is an example of an agentive function, i.e. the use to which agents intentionally put objects. But we can also impose the function of being a medium of exchange on a piece of paper, which is an example of a status function. In the first case, the function is fulfilled in virtue of physical structure, but in the second case the physical structure is insufficient for it to perform its function, rather it requires collective intentionality. This capacity to impose functions on objects, where the function cannot be performed in virtue of the physical structure alone but requires collective intentionality, is used when we create institutional facts: “Within the category of agentive functions is a special subcategory of those entities whose agentive function is to *symbolize, represent, stand for, or—in general—to mean* something or other.” (Ibid., 23). These functions are called status functions and they are the same as institutional facts.⁶

Institutional facts can exist only within systems of constitutive rules. The contrast between regulative rules and constitutive rules is helpful in order to explain what a constitutive rule is: “Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules. Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules.” (Searle, 1969, 34). Thus, constitutive rules “... do not merely regulate, they also create the very possibility of certain activities.” (Ibid., 27). There is a logical structure underlying the imposition of status

5 This is somewhat misleading since “doing something together” also includes us simply believing something. We can believe something without exhibiting cooperative behavior. So, the crucial feature of collective intentionality seems to be sharing an intentional state.

6 When it comes to agentive functions, both singular and collective intentionality is sufficient to assign a function, but status functions require collective intentionality.

functions and this logical structure can be spelled out in the *form* of constitutive rules: X counts as Y in context C. For example, this piece of paper (X) counts as money (Y) in virtue of collective intentionality. For the Y term to refer to an institutional fact, the formula has to be interpreted in a specific way: “The Y term has to assign a new *status* that the object does not already have just in virtue of satisfying the X term; and there has to be collective agreement, or at least acceptance, both in the imposition of that status on the stuff referred to by the X term and about the function that goes with that status.” (Searle, 1995, 44). So-called ‘deontic powers’, which are rights and obligations in different forms, are internal to status functions/institutional facts. For example, having money (a status function) means having the right (a deontic power) to buy certain things, things that you could not otherwise have bought.

In sum, an institutional fact is identical with the status function that is imposed on an object by collective intentionality according to the formula “X counts as Y in context C.” People must share the belief (an intentional state) that the piece of paper is money in order for the piece of paper to be/become money. This means that the collective belief is *constitutive* of the piece of paper being money. That is, collective acceptance is partly constitutive of institutional facts. It follows that institutional facts are observer-relative, i.e. they exist relative to the intentionality of observers. Furthermore, seeming to be money comes prior to being money. Thus, the logical relation when it comes to institutional facts is: seeming to be x comes prior to being x. Thomasson questions this relation by arguing that it does not hold for all social and institutional facts. Let us turn to her objection.

Thomasson’s objection

Many philosophers writing in the field of social ontology agree on and point out a peculiar feature, namely, that social concepts, in contrast to concepts that describe the natural world, are self-referential (cf. Barnes, 1983; Searle, 1995; Tuomela, 2002). Searle writes: “Logically speaking, the statement ‘A certain type of substance, x, is money’ implies an indefinite inclusive disjunction of the form ‘x is used as money or x is regarded as money or x is believed to be money, etc.’. But that seems to have the consequence that the concept of money, the very definition of the word ‘money’ is self-referential, because in order that it should fall under the concept of money, it must be believed to be, or used as, or regarded as etc. satisfying the definition.” (1995, 32). In short, the self-referentiality of social concepts means that for something (S) to be an institutional

fact, it has to be regarded, or thought of, or used as S. This means that our beliefs are partly constitutive of the phenomena in question, which explains why the relation of “what seems to be the case comes prior to what is the case” holds for institutional facts. Searle writes of observer-relative features, which includes institutional facts: “... for any observer-relative feature F, seeming to be F is logically prior to being F because – appropriately understood – seeming to be F is a necessary condition of being F.” (1995, 13).

Thomasson claims that Searle’s theory cannot capture power structures and economic phenomena like inflation and recession since, on his account, social concepts are self-referential. She challenges the idea that all social concepts are self-referential and that it is a necessary condition for all observer-relative features, including institutional facts, that “seeming to be F is a necessary condition of being F” by pointing out that there can be social or institutional facts no one is aware of:

But the idea that all social concepts are self-referential entails that there cannot be social facts of any kind whose existence members of that society do not know about – for if there are social facts of a given kind F, people must accept that certain things (or things of certain sorts) are F (and, since their collective acceptance makes it so, they must collectively be right about what things or sorts of things are F). But this severely limits the role the social sciences can play in expanding human knowledge – many of the discoveries of greatest moment in the social sciences are things such as economic cycles, class systems, and power structures, that are capable of existing even if no one believes that anything of the kind exists, or even if no one entertains the relevant concept at all or has prior beliefs about anything of that kind. Call a kind F of social entities ‘epistemically opaque’ if things of that kind are capable of existing even if no one believes that anything of kind F exists, and ‘conceptually opaque’ if things of that kind are capable of existing even if no one has any F-regarding beliefs whatsoever. Recessions, for example, seem to be both epistemically and conceptually opaque. ... Contrary to Searle’s general claim, seeming to be a recession is not logically prior to being a recession. ... Many of the power structures pointed out by political scientists and sociologists – i.e. those involving the economic power of a company in a small community, community-enforced gender roles, or a class structure – can exist without anyone having any beliefs about power structures of that kind. (Thomasson, 2003, 275-76).

This objection is central. If Searle’s theory cannot handle it, its potential for explaining the social world is severely limited. Furthermore, the claim that social ontology is the foundation of the social sciences and political philosophy is jeopardized.

Thomasson’s objection also questions one of background assumptions in

Searle's theory, namely his way of distinguishing between natural and social concepts. Searle writes: "At this point, I am just calling attention to a peculiar logical feature that distinguishes social concepts from such natural concepts as 'mountain' and 'molecule.' Something can be a mountain even if no one believes it is a mountain; something can be a molecule even if no one thinks about anything at all about it. But for social facts, the attitude that we take toward the phenomenon is partly constitutive of the phenomenon." (1995, 33). Using self-referentiality to distinguish between social and natural concepts is challenged since there are social facts no one is aware of.

Four conditions of adequacy

As Thomasson notes, the feature of self-referentiality makes it problematic to include epistemically and conceptually opaque kinds of facts in Searle's theory. Thus, one might ask: Why hold on to self-referentiality when it causes problems to account for opaque kinds of social facts? In other words, one way to include power structures is simply to give up the feature of self-referentiality. However, the consequences of doing this are problematic. It would mean giving up the way of distinguishing between natural and social concepts and thus giving up one of the background assumptions of the theory.⁷ More importantly, Searle's theory of social reality involves that social concepts are self-referential and this feature is a central part of the analysis of institutional facts. My idea is to keep the building blocks provided as far as possible to investigate how much of social reality that can be captured by these tools. The reason behind this is to keep the ontology simple and giving up the feature of self-referentiality would mean a less simple ontology. To see why, consider three positions, from strong to increasingly weaker, regarding the self-referentiality of social concepts.⁸ Recall that this self-referentiality is related to a necessary condition for institutional facts, namely, "what seems to be the case comes prior to what is the case."

7 However, Thomasson (personal correspondence) has pointed out that there are other ways of distinguishing between natural and social concepts, e.g. in terms of dependence on collective intentionality.

8 There might be a fourth position as well, namely, opaque kinds of institutional facts that are neither reducible to nor ontologically dependent on self-referential and transparent institutional facts. For instance, there might be opaque kinds of facts at the micro-level (Thomasson, personal correspondence). However, I think the same kind of argument can be advanced against this position; if there are opaque kinds of micro facts, then these can be reduced to self-referential and transparent institutional facts.

The first and strongest position is to claim that all institutional facts are self-referential and transparent. The second is to state that there are opaque kinds of facts but that these can be reduced to self-referential and transparent institutional facts. The third is to say that opaque kinds of facts are not reducible to but rather existentially dependent on self-referential and transparent institutional facts.

Thomasson's argument convincingly shows that the first position is no longer an option. However, I think the second position is preferable to the third position, since the second position keeps a weaker kind of self-referentiality. This means a more simple ontology in the sense that all opaque kinds of facts can be reduced to self-referential and transparent facts. According to the second position, then, there are no opaque kinds of facts that cannot be reduced to self-referential and transparent institutional facts, which means that no additional building blocks or additional level of the ontology is needed to account for these facts. In contrast, the third position states that there are other or new types of facts, i.e. facts that are not in any way self-referential. Hence, there are additional building blocks in the theory, namely, irreducible opaque kinds of social facts. Furthermore, it needs to be shown how these new types of facts fit into the social world. Therefore, a great deal hinges on keeping the self-referentiality of social concepts. The solution to Thomasson's objection, then, should preserve this feature.

There are three other conditions of adequacy; the answer must locate power structures and economic phenomena like inflation within Searle's theory, that is, explain how epistemically and conceptually opaque entities can be taken into account. The reason is that the social world certainly contains phenomena like inflation, recession, and power structures and thus a plausible theory of the social world needs to show how it can account for such phenomena. The solution must also show that these entities are ontologically dependent on institutional facts, rather than the other way around. This is partly due to the foundation claim: If Searle's theory is to be the foundation of the social sciences then this foundation needs to be in terms of institutional facts (the object of his analysis). In contrast, if power structures were the basic units of the social world, then these would be foundational, rather than institutional facts. And the *possibility* of discoveries in the social sciences needs to be explained, since the social sciences involve such discoveries. Recall Thomasson's statement, which I agree with: "... many of the discoveries of greatest moment in the social sciences are things such as economic cycles, class systems, and power structures, that are capable of existing even if no one believes that anything of the kind exists ..." (2003, 276).

In short, the four conditions are: keep the self-referentiality of social concepts, locate power structures, show that power structures are ontologically dependent on institutional facts, and explain how there can be discoveries in the social sciences.

The micro-macro reply

In this section, I will argue that reducing opaque kinds of social facts to self-referential and transparent institutional facts, using the idea of a macro-level and a micro-level, manages to meet the four conditions and thus is an adequate solution. In other words, I will show how two *seemingly* inconsistent phenomena; Thomasson's opaque kinds of social facts and Searle's self-referential institutional facts, really are consistent on a *deeper level*, and hence, that opaque kinds of social facts fit the model of Searle's analysis.

Consider Thomasson's examples of opaque kinds of social facts. She mentions different kinds of power structures such as a class structure, economic phenomena like recessions, and community-enforced gender roles. Let us focus on economic phenomena and power structures like a gender structure. There are many different uses of the term 'structure' in the social science literature. I regard structure as a higher order feature or a macro phenomenon constituted by micro phenomena. To make this idea clearer, note that explanations using a macro-level and a micro-level are common in the natural sciences. For instance, the surface features of water, e.g. being colorless, liquid etc. are viewed as surface phenomena or macro-features. These macro-features are explained by the chemical composition of water, i.e. by the micro-level, which is the fundamental level.

Parallel to this *form* of explanation, one might view the epistemically and conceptually opaque entities Thomasson discusses as macro-phenomena, while institutional facts are the micro-level. Searle's theory focuses on the micro-level and thus the theory might not have much to say about macro phenomena, but still, it manages to show how macro phenomena exist, that is, to take them into account, or so I will argue.

The first part of this argument is thus that power structures and inflation are macro-phenomena, while institutional facts are micro-phenomena. The second part is that macro-phenomena are reducible to micro-phenomena and thus the relation of "what seems to be the case comes prior to being the case" still holds. In other words, institutional facts exist because we believe they exist. Power structures and inflation exist because we believe that the institutional

facts which constitute them exist. That is, people in a particular society need not have any beliefs about inflation for it to exist, but they need to have beliefs about money, both for money and for inflation to exist.

Institutional facts as micro phenomena, power structures as macro phenomena

Let us investigate the first claim; power structures are macro phenomena while institutional facts are micro phenomena, in more detail. To make this idea clearer, consider a successful strategy in the natural sciences, namely, micro-reduction. Jaegwon Kim (1998) writes of micro-reduction: “A pervasive trend in modern science has been to explain macrophenomena in terms of their microstructures, and reduce theories about the former to theories about the latter. [...] What is needed is the idea that one is a theory is a *microtheory* in relation to another.” (1998, 147). As suggested, Searle’s theory of social reality with its focus on institutional facts is the micro-theory in relation to the macro-theories that sociologists and economists have developed concerning the correlations between e.g. urbanization and decline in religious practice, and unemployment rates and inflation.⁹ As mentioned, social macro phenomena include power structures such as class a structure or a gender structure, economic phenomena like inflation and recession, and urbanization and migration. Some macro phenomena are unintended consequences of other arrangements, e.g. traffic jams and migration, while others are systematic fall-outs (a species of unintended consequences), e.g. entrepreneurs sell where marginal cost equals marginal revenue, or that people who are not able to sell their labor in a market economy will be poor.¹⁰

What, then, is the relation between the macro-level and the micro-level? To answer this, consider micro-reduction once again. Kim writes: “The rough idea is that the microtheory deals with objects that are proper parts of the objects in the domain of the macro-theory. More specifically, the domain of the microtheory will include objects that are parts of the objects in the domain of

9 Philip Pettit lists various phenomena such as ‘increased unemployment leads to a rise in crime, urbanization leads to a decline in religious practice, policies for increasing employment cause inflation’ usually claimed to be macro phenomena in the social sciences (1993, 129-30).

10 I view the class of macro phenomena as both wider than and as incorporating the class of unintended consequences of other arrangements, since e.g. migration (a macro/higher level phenomenon) can both be an intended consequence of a certain policy or an unintended consequence of a policy.

the macrotheory; in addition it will include aggregates of these micro-objects, and aggregates of aggregates, and so on. And the objects of the macrotheory are identified with certain complex aggregates in this domain. Moreover, the microtheory has a set of properties and relations characterizing its basic micro-objects, and will generate complex properties for aggregates of these objects from the basic properties and relations.” (1998, 147). Parallel, institutional facts and intentional states are the proper parts of the macro phenomena of the social world. In other words, macro phenomena are complex aggregates of institutional facts and intentional states. For example, a power structure is a certain complex aggregate of institutional facts and intentional states.

An example might make the idea of a power structure as a complex aggregate of intentional states and institutional facts clearer. I noted earlier that a characteristic of power structures is their effect on individuals’ life chances, which can be seen in the following case: Five-year-old girls and boys in a kindergarten in Sweden were asked to draw a picture of themselves in the role of their future dream occupation. The girls drew things such as nurses and school teachers, while the boys drew astronauts, doctors and professional soccer players. The children were then asked to imagine being of the other gender and draw a picture of their favorite occupation. At this point, the girls’ pictures looked radically different; they drew the same things as the boys did before, while most of the boys still drew astronauts and soccer players (Hell and Strang, 1994). The girls’ drawings suggest that they have grasped parts of what we might refer to as a gender structure. The gender structure is an example of a pervasive power structure which affects the life chances of individuals, e.g. in achieving career goals. That is, a girl and a boy with the same abilities will most probably have different life chances due to their gender. One of the girls might for instance become a nurse, rather than a doctor. We might explain this by referring to the influence of her parents, teachers and other people around her. For instance, they might make statements to the effect that boys are better apt for natural sciences and thus for becoming doctors. The girl might listen and start believing in it (an intentional state). This belief is part of her forming a desire (another intentional state) to become a nurse rather than a doctor. This is a central feature of power structures, namely, their impact on desire formation. The girl might also focus on certain patterns in trying to make sense of the world around her and she might thus realize that most of the fathers of her friends are doctors, lawyers or own private companies, while the mothers are school teachers, nurses, or work part-time. That someone holds a certain position or occupation is an example of an institutional fact/deontic power. But, if this girl would have been a boy, with the same capacities, this person

would probably have seen a different pattern and formed different desires about future occupations.

This is a simplified way of explaining how power structures might affect the life chances of individuals and also to understand the idea of how a certain complex aggregate of institutional facts and intentional states (micro) constitutes a power structure (macro). In other words, a power structure like this gender structure is the sum of everyone's attitudes (intentional states) regarding, for example, appropriate behavior, occupations for girls vs. boys and the occupations (institutional facts/deontic powers) of the adults.

Macro phenomena can be reduced to micro phenomena

Let us investigate the second claim; macro phenomena can be reduced to micro phenomena, in more detail. Take inflation as an example. The value of money is dependent on that we think money has value and that we use money on a daily basis. Here, the relation of "what seems to be the case comes prior to what is the case" holds. It is an institutional fact that a certain piece of paper is money and the level of description is the micro-level.

Inflation is a macro-phenomenon, which is no more than the sum of each individual's beliefs and actions in regard to valuing and using money.¹¹ That is, inflation can be cashed out in terms of a large sum of individual actions at the micro level. This means that inflation is reducible to what we think is the case, i.e. to money etc. Hence, the self-referentiality and thus the relation of "what seems to be the case comes prior to what is the case" still hold. This satisfies the first condition of adequacy. I will come back to this point.

Let us pause a moment on the term 'reduction' to be clear about how it is used in my argument. I claimed that power structures and inflation can be viewed as macro-features and that these macro-features can be reduced to the micro-level. There are three main positions regarding macro-features: The *eliminativist* claims that statements about these kinds of features are always literally false, but they might be helpful as a heuristic device to talk about social reality. The *reductionist* claims that statements about these kinds of features can be literally true, but the truth-maker is a set of facts at another level. The *irreduc-*

11 This is a simplified picture of inflation. We need to add institutions, institutional facts and intentional states. For instance, a banking system, the head of the central bank adjusting interest rate levels, unemployment rates, and people's expectations regarding the economy. But all this can still be explained within the framework of Searle's theory.

tionist claims that statements about these kinds of features can be literally true and the truth-maker is *sui generis* facts of the kind that the statement is about.

There is also a distinction between causal and ontological reduction. In most cases, causal and ontological reduction go together, but not in all. So, if one can show that the causal powers of one property can be accounted for in terms of the causal powers of another property, i.e. causal reduction, then the first property is normally also ontologically reduced to the second. But the two might come apart, e.g. the causal powers of the brain can either be described at the level of brain processes or at the level of consciousness. But, consciousness has a first-person ontology, while brain processes have a third-person ontology. In this case, even though there is causal reduction, there need not be ontological reduction.¹²

My claim can now be specified: Power structures and economic phenomena like recession and inflation can be both ontologically and causally reduced to institutional facts. They can be causally reduced in the sense that the system can be described at two different levels, the micro-level and the macro-level. The causal powers of both levels of description are the same. Furthermore, power structures can be ontologically reduced to institutional facts since there is no crucial difference such as a first-person and third-person ontology. Statements about power structures and inflation are literally true, but they are made true by facts at the micro-level, i.e. institutional facts. So, the macro-level is often opaque as Thomasson's examples show, but these macro phenomena can still be reduced to transparent and self-referential institutional facts, that is, to the micro-level.

But, one might question this reduction by arguing that there is a *significant qualitative difference* between the macro phenomena and the micro phenomena: How can macro phenomena which often have the feature of being opaque be reduced to micro phenomena, which have other features, such as being transparent and self-referential? The objector continues: This difference is enough to show that macro phenomena are irreducible. Hence, macro phenomena constitute a separate level of social reality.

To answer this objection, one needs to consider the question: how much and/or what kind of difference is required for something to be irreducible? To my knowledge, there is no principled answer in the literature. Rather, the issue seems to be debated by the use of examples. In the philosophy of mind, 'qualia', that is, the qualitative, subjective or phenomenal properties of mental states, e.g. what it feels like to be in a certain mental state such as pain, are often used

12 The example comes from Searle (2002).

to show that mental states cannot be identical with physical states since the latter do not share these properties. Many believe that this difference is significant enough to show that consciousness is irreducible to brain processes. For example, Searle writes: “The difference is that consciousness has a first person ontology; that is, it only exists *as experienced* by some human or animal, and therefore, it cannot be reduced to something that has a third person ontology, something that exists independently of experiences.” (2002, 60).

Now, contrast the example drawn from the philosophy of mind to our previous water example. The macro properties of water, e.g. liquidity and transparency, are not the same on the micro-level, that is, the individual atoms that make up the H₂O molecules do not share these features. Still, we say that water is reducible to certain collections of molecules. Hence, this difference is not significant enough to ground irreducibility.

Which of the two cases does my claim that opaque macro phenomena can be reduced to self-referential and transparent institutional facts most resemble? I think the latter rather than the former: Just as in the case of water and the individual atoms that make up the H₂O molecules, one level is transparent while the other is not.¹³ That is, a macro feature of water is its transparency, while the individual atoms that make up the H₂O molecule do not share this feature. The same holds for social reality, but the relation goes the other way around: the macro features of society, such as power structures, are non-transparent, or opaque, while the micro-level of institutional facts is transparent and self-referential. Hence, this difference is not significant enough to ground irreducibility and thus be an obstacle to the reduction of the macro-level to the micro-level.¹⁴

13 I use ‘transparent’ literally in the water example.

14 Similarly, one might object that the macro explains the micro rather than the other way around. Thus, my argument has got the relation backwards. For instance, once one grasps a power structure like the gender structure (macro) one might begin to look at the every day social interactions (micro) in a different way. However, it is important to distinguish explanation in the sense of understanding from constitution. My claim is about constitution, not explanation. I would say that the micro-level constitutes the macro, and that the micro sometimes also explains the macro, as in the case of inflation, while the macro can help one to understand, but not constitute, the micro, as in the example of the gender structure.

Satisfying the four conditions of adequacy

Let us return to the four conditions. The first condition is to keep the self-referentiality of social concepts and thus that “what seems to be the case comes prior to what is the case” is a necessary condition for observer-relative features such as institutional facts. The idea is that macro-phenomena are no more than the sum of micro-phenomena. This means that macro-phenomena are reducible to micro-phenomena and thereby to what we think is the case. Hence, the relation of “what seems to be the case comes prior to what is the case” still holds.

The reduction of power structures and economic phenomena like inflation to institutional facts means that power structures have been located in the theory, which is the second condition of adequacy. That is, the epistemically and conceptually opaque entities Thomasson discusses are reducible to institutional facts. Hence, they can be taken into account. For example, the gender structure can be reduced to institutional facts and intentional states: What makes statements about a gender structure true are statements about institutional facts and intentional states, i.e. facts at the micro-level. In other words, the gender structure is really a certain complex aggregate of institutional facts and intentional states. The reduction means that the self-referentiality is preserved (condition 1) and power structures have been taken into account (condition 2).

The third condition is to show that economic phenomena like inflation and power structures like the gender structure are ontologically dependent on institutional facts, rather than the other way around. To show this, one might begin by pointing out that inflation does not disappear just because we stop believing it to exist, never believed it to exist at all, or never use the concept of inflation. But, there cannot be inflation without money, while the converse does not hold; there can be money without inflation. This shows that inflation is ontologically dependent on institutional facts. Likewise for the gender structure: there can be institutional facts without a gender structure (just imagine a society in which individuals’ life chances are not affected by their gender) but there cannot be a gender structure without institutional facts, just as there cannot be a class structure without institutional facts like money.

The fourth condition is to leave room for discoveries in the social sciences. Recall Thomasson’s question: If all kinds of social facts are self-referential, how can there be discoveries in the social sciences? Two ideas are especially helpful in answering this. First, the opaqueness can be explained in the following way: macro-phenomena like power structures are so complex that they become invisible at the micro-level, which means that we do not discover these

phenomena until we study the macro-level. In other words, it is extremely difficult to see systematic patterns and the consequences of institutional facts at the micro-level. Thus, discoveries often require taking a macro-perspective on these phenomena by using tools such as statistics, just like many social scientists do: The members of the society do not know that a certain complex aggregate of their institutional facts (A) also refers to an invisible power structure (B), while the social scientists have figured out that $(A) = (B)$. That is, we can describe the system at two different levels, either at a micro level as an extremely complex aggregate of institutional facts which the participants do not fully see the consequences of, or at a macro-level, as the social scientist does. Studying the macro-level might involve noticing some systematic patterns and thus discovering power structures.

Secondly, Thomasson (2003) proposes a solution to this problem by using the idea of unintended consequences of other arrangements. Traffic jams are an everyday example of an unintended consequence of people driving cars. Another example is that a market economy has the consequence that individuals who are not able to sell their labor on the market will be poor, unless there is an extensive social security system.

A difference between these two cases is relevant for the possibility of discoveries in the social sciences: It follows from the assumptions of a market economy that people who are not being able to sell their labor will be poor, that is, no empirical investigation is needed to discover this. But, for some unintended consequences such as traffic jams and the advantage of being left-handed in racquet sports, empirical investigations are needed. To make this clear, consider racquet sports. There are certain constitutive rules of these games. But there are also unintended consequences that follow from accepting the constitutive rules: The percentage of left-handed players among top level players in racquet sports is significantly higher than the percentage of left-handed people in the population at large. There is nothing in the constitutive rules of e.g. tennis that explains this. It is rather something we happen to find out after looking at statistics. So, by accepting the constitutive rules of tennis, other things like the advantage of being left-handed, i.e. an unintended consequence follows. These consequences can be discovered by empirical investigation.

In short, some unintended consequences allow for a priori discovery, while other unintended consequences allow for a posteriori discoveries. Inflation, for example, can be viewed as an unintended consequence of the constitutive rules of a banking system and people valuing and using money etc., which allows for a posteriori discovery.

Summary

I have discussed the plausibility of the claim that social ontology is the foundation of the social sciences by examining the scope of Searle's theory of social reality. I focused on what I regard as the most central objection, namely, that epistemically and conceptually opaque entities such as 'invisible' power structures like a gender structure and economic phenomena like inflation cannot be taken into account due to the self-referentiality of social concepts.

I suggested four conditions of adequacy for a reply to this objection: preserve the self-referentiality of social concepts, locate epistemically and conceptually opaque entities, show that they are ontologically dependent on institutional facts, and allow for the possibility of discoveries in the social sciences.

I argued that one can view power structures and inflation as macro phenomena, constituted by micro phenomena, that is, institutional facts and intentional states. So, macro phenomena are certain complex aggregates of intentional states and institutional facts. These macro phenomena can be reduced to the micro phenomena in the sense that what make statements about e.g. the gender structure and inflation true are facts at the micro-level, i.e. institutional facts and intentional states. Thus, the self-referentiality is preserved since the macro phenomena are reduced to institutional facts. Furthermore, the reduction means that power structures and inflation have been located in the theory. I argued that inflation would disappear if institutional facts disappeared while the converse does not hold. Thus, inflation is ontologically dependent on institutional facts. I suggested the same kind of argument for the gender structure. The micro-macro reply was also used in explaining the possibility of discoveries in the social sciences: macro-phenomena like power structures and inflation are so complex that they often become invisible at the micro-level, which means that we do not discover these phenomena until we study the macro-level.

In sum, I have argued that pervasive and crucial elements of the social world can be captured by using the tools of Searle's theory. Hence, the scope of this theory is wider than previously acknowledged and the foundation claim is made much more plausible.

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