

# JOHN SEARLE: TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIETY

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**Abstract.** Like all great philosophers, John Searle provides fresh insight into phenomena that lie right before our eyes every minute of every day. His focus is on the foundational issues that underlie the manner in which social institutions are created and maintained, in more precise terms, he was investigating the ontology of social reality. Like Searle believes, it is a good idea to understand the foundational issues because a grasp of the basic ontology of any discipline will deepen the further understanding of issues within that discipline.

## 1. Introduction

This is very significant for several reasons one of which is because the discipline of philosophy has over the centuries gradually lost territory due to the encroachment of the empirical sciences. Physics and biology, and even very lately, psychology were all parts of the discipline of philosophy but have been subsumed by empirical social sciences.

The whole grand idea of a Philosophy of Society therefore is the study of the nature of human society itself and the mode of existence of institutional entities How Searle develops this novel idea of a social ontology, and his introduction of important concepts such as Status Functions and Speech Acts is the task of this paper.

How Searle intends to achieve this task of building a social ontology, and his introduction of important concepts such as Status Functions and Speech Acts is the task of this paper.

What is the Ontology of Social Reality?

Searle begins by proposing an abandoning of the traditional western dis=nc=on between mind and body. He says that the Western intellectual tradition has erroneously split our experience of reality into a dualism, as it were, into two worlds - with the idea that there is a fundamental dis=nc=on between mind

and body between the physical and the mental. The situa=on is even made worse by those philosophers who propose a third world, for instance Frege, Popper and the more recent Habermas who divide reality into three different worlds.

Searle thinks that we should never have started counting how many worlds there are. We live in one world at most, a world which as described by physics and chemistry has at its basis what is called particles. These particles are organized into systems. Some of these systems are organic systems and some of the organic systems have consciousness. With consciousness comes intentionality and when we have consciousness and intentionality, we have reached the evolutionary stage of animal, mammals and primates like ourselves who form social groups.

Therefore, at the foundation of Searle's proposal of a social ontology is the fact that there is one world and also there is one human intentional activity that is at the basis of the whole of social reality. This human intentional activity is the fact that we have the capacity to impose functions on objects and people where the objects and the people by themselves cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure. For instance money cannot be easily transformed into bread. The performance of the function requires that there be a collectively recognized status that the person or object has, and it is only in virtue of that status that the person or object can perform the function in question. That Status is what he calls Status Functions.

### Status Functions in Searle's Social Ontology

An important distinction is necessary before explaining in greater detail the idea of Status Functions. Searle speaks, on the one hand, about observer independent phenomena like earthquakes, mountains, molecules and processes like photosynthesis, which exist regardless of the observer and is studied by the natural sciences. On the other hand, he speaks of the observer relative phenomena, those things whose existence or relevance depends on being treated or regarded in a certain way by human agents.

For him, functions are observer relative. In his straightforward way, Searle would say: 'We don't discover functions, we assign functions.' It is not in the DNA of anyone to be President, the function is assigned and human beings are the only species capable of doing this, that is, giving collective recognition and acceptance. What then are Status functions? To give a definition one could say that they are functions that can only be performed in virtue of the collective acceptance of the status. It gives people reason for action that are independent of their immediate inclinations. Human beings can create reasons for acting – and because of status functions they have commitments and obligations. Animals, on the other hand, are not capable of having Status functions, they only have status Hierarchy in the animal Kingdom like the Alpha Male or Female. They don't act on obligations or commitments but they act on the inclinations that we want them to have.

In other words, human beings are capable of making statements that determine the nature of society, just by declaring it and then collectively accepting the change as real. It is that act of making declarations he called Status Function Declarations. Examples abound everywhere: a piece of private property, a political office holder, money, and a professor in a university are all people or objects that are able to perform certain functions in virtue of the fact that they have a collectively recognized status that enables

them to perform those functions in a way they could not do without the collective declaration and recognition of the status.

Closely related to the declarations that make institutional realities possible is the idea of Speech Acts. How is it possible that we create social institutions just by the word of the mouth or just by merely saying it. And Status Function Declarations are a kind of Speech Acts.

## Conclusion

Status functions and Speech acts are at the very heart of Searle's social ontology and to stress this point he says that speech acts, and the linguistic intentionality that they express, are the foundation of all social phenomena because all of institutional reality is created by linguistic representation. Therefore all of human social life from language to money to marriage, government are mainly a matter of institutional reality which is brought about by linguistic representations.

Finally, Searle also notes that perhaps with the exception of language itself, all of institutional reality, and therefore, in a sense, all of human civilization, is created by speech acts that have the same logical form as Declarations.

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