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Do social institutions require collective acceptance?

Mattia Gallotti and John Michael (eds.): Perspectives on social ontology and social cognition. Studies in the philosophy of sociality 4. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014, viii+189, \$99.00 HB

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According to economists, anything that is generally accepted as a means of exchange is money. Philosophers of society such as John Searle and Raimo Tuomela claim that collective acceptance is of central importance to all institutions. According to what Tuomela (2002) calls “the Collective Acceptance Thesis” (CAT), collective acceptance of an institution is necessary and sufficient for that institution to exist. Searle is the most well-known defender of CAT. In this book, which features a short paper by Searle as well as an interview, CAT is criticized by philosophers such as Francesco Guala, Edouard Machery, and Ruth Millikan. These criticisms are penetrating and deserve to be widely read.

The Collective Acceptance Thesis

Tuomela, who is hardly mentioned in this volume, has developed and defended CAT in detail. He regards it as a conceptual truth. Furthermore, he explicates the interdependence between institutional entities and collective acceptance (CA) in terms of reflexivity and performativity. CAT captures reflexivity in terms of the claim that the very fact that something is money entails that it is collectively accepted as money (CA is necessary). Performativity is a matter of our thoughts making the institutional world into what it is (CA is sufficient). My hunch is that Searle accepts all these claims. He takes himself to be exploring the logical structure of institutional reality. This suggests that he regards CAT as a conceptual truth. Furthermore, he has recently argued that the imposition of status functions is

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to be understood in terms of Status Function Declarations (Searle 2010). Reflexivity and performativity are plausibly regarded as the core features of declarations.

Searle argues in this volume that there are no institutional objects. In fact, he claims that “it reveals a fundamental misunderstanding” of his project to think that he is trying “to define the notion of a social object or the notion of social category of objects” (21). Instead, he is concerned with institutional facts. Facts are of crucial importance to institutional reality, because they are propositional and can as such feature in propositional attitudes, and such attitudes can motivate human behavior. Searle argues that the notion of an institutional object leads to inconsistencies. Consider Confederate currency. After 1865 only, a section of the southern population continued to use and accept it as money. Searle believes that this scenario commits someone who believes that money is an object to say that after 1865 Confederate currency was money and that it was not money. This contradiction can be avoided by refraining from talk about objects. As fact talk can be relativized to contexts, it does not suffer from this problem.

This clarification of his view is sorely needed, as each of the contributors who address this issue misinterprets Searle. I myself have entertained the idea that Searle embraces the notion of an institutional object as one of two possible interpretations (Hindriks 2013). It is a pity that Searle rejects a genuine social ontology out of hand. He even claims that he has “never seen anybody seriously try” to provide “a definition of a social object on analogy with a material object,” which can only be seen as a measure of his ignorance of the literature (20).

Against reflexivity

Millikan, Guala, and Machery criticize reflexivity against the background of the claim that there are social or institutional objects. Ruth Millikan accepts that thoughts influence the social world, and that the labels people introduce for what is affected by those thoughts tend to reinforce them, but she denies that people have to think of “the origin” of social objects “as social” (29). This means that she rejects reflexivity. She claims that money “is typically used without any thought or understanding of the conventional nature of financial transactions” (34, note 4). Her argument concerns conventions, and the coordination problems they solve. She claims that conventions can fulfill this function without thoughts about the thoughts of other people. The underlying idea must be that such higher-order attitudes are crucial for understanding the social mode of existence of social objects.

Guala disagrees with Millikan in that he believes that such higher-order attitudes are crucial for institutions. In order for anything to successfully function as money, people must expect that others will accept it as a means of payment. He rejects reflexivity because he regards this as a causal rather than a conceptual matter. His argument is that people can have massively incorrect beliefs about the instantiation conditions of institutional kinds. People might, for instance, mistakenly believe that money has to be backed by gold. Consider also the condition that money must be issued by a central bank. This cannot be a conceptual condition, as cigarettes can also be money. Instead, money serves as a coordination device, as it makes people confident that “others will want to hold the paper bills in the future” (64).

Note that the definition of money which I offered at the beginning of this review provides the basis for a counterargument. It may well be that what actually is collectively accepted as money in some context is a contingent matter. Even so, it could still be a conceptual truth that anything that is generally accepted as a means of exchange is money, whatever it happens to be in a particular context. Restricting the scope of CAT in this way saves it from Guala's criticism, although he is likely to say in response that this trivializes CAT.

Machery's concern is with beliefs people have about the mode of existence of institutional entities. Machery maintains that "recognition of the social status and attendant function of an entity can only occur if people grasp its social mode of existence" (92). There is no way around this, he argues, given that "collective recognition is to be understood on the model of a declaration" (98). In practice, however, people sometimes reify institutional kinds in the sense that they take them to have a natural or supernatural basis. Searle acknowledges this when he claims that "an institutional fact might function only because it is not believed to be an institutional fact" (2010, 119). People might, for instance, attribute what they believe to be a supernatural power to the pope, and it might be that they thereby support certain deontic powers of the pope. Or, to use some of Machery's examples, they might take gender or race to be biological kinds.

Machery's strategy is similar to that of Guala, as he takes widespread mistaken beliefs to count against reflexivity. One of the arguments that he offers, however, can be turned against him. Machery claims that CAT is not obvious and intuitive (94). It has become widely accepted, however, that conceptual truths need not be obvious. Machery discusses the status of social norms. Empirical research reveals that people often fail to appreciate the status of social and moral norms. Whereas the former have limited application, the latter apply universally, or so researchers investigating the moral-conventional distinction assume. Machery takes the mistakes people make in their judgments about the mode of existence of social norms to imply that this is not a conceptual truth about such norms. Alternatively, it could be taken to reveal that conceptual truths about modes of existence are often relatively opaque. Note also that people might have false background beliefs that provide for extenuating circumstances.

Finally, race and gender might be special in that they do not carry a particular deontology in the sense that concerns Searle. Even when people treat white men in characteristic ways, being a white man does not come with explicit rights and obligations. In light of this, race and gender might be non-institutional social kinds that do not require thoughts about other people's thoughts. This line of critique also works against Millikan. The key idea is that CAT is not meant to apply to social entities that do not involve higher-order thoughts.

Social ontology and social cognition

These and other contributions in the first part of the book concern social ontology. They raise issues of social cognition, the discipline to which the second part of the book is devoted. Those papers, however, are mostly exploratory in nature. Perhaps,

the field is not ready yet to address the challenges raised in the first part of the book. If so, I can only hope that social ontology and social cognition will have more and closer encounters soon. The book reveals that in order to be tenable, CAT needs to be spelled out in considerable detail. And even relatively weak versions of it might not hold across the board. But even if its scope is rather limited, CAT can serve as a heuristic in social ontology that is useful for determining the different roles that collective attitudes play with respect to social and institutional entities.

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