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How Social Objects (Fail to) Function

Frank Hindriks 

Driver's licenses and traffic lights make driving safer. And dollar bills and credit cards make exchanges more efficient as compared to bartering. Social objects can be useful in such ways because they have certain powers. Dollar bills have purchasing power. And driver's licenses restrict access to the public road to people that have them. But what purpose do social objects serve more generally? To answer this question, I explore the role they play in social practices and institutions. Such social forms are patterns of behavior. Their function is to generate collective benefits. Social objects and the powers they have typically play an important role in this process.

According to the dual function theory that I propose here, social objects have two functions, a contributory function and a signaling function. Their contributory function is to facilitate or enable social forms to generate collective benefits. In order for them to contribute to this process, agents must exercise their social powers. But how do objects acquire such powers? Due to certain salient characteristics. Such signals enable agents to converge on the same kind of object for similar purposes. Thus, the signaling function of social objects is to indicate mutually beneficial opportunities for interaction that involve those powers. In this sense, traffic lights signal when to stop and when to go.

After presenting this dual function theory, I use it to solve a puzzle that Seumas Miller (2001) and Barry Smith (2003) introduced almost two decades ago. Intuitively, the status of an object and its powers go together. For instance, in order for a piece of paper to be a dollar bill, it must be possible to use it as a means of exchange. However, a dollar bill can be so damaged that no one accepts it anymore. It appears that such "failing originals" *have a status but not its concomitant powers* (Almäng 2016). The reverse seems possible as well. A counterfeit dollar bill can look so real that one can use it to buy things with. This has been taken to mean that what I call "passing forgeries" *have certain powers but not the associated status*.

Cases such as these give rise to what I call "the mismatch problem," which is the challenge of saving the intuition that statuses and powers stand or fall together.¹ Barry Smith (2003) and Jan Almäng (2016) have argued that the intuition cannot be saved. Against this, I argue that their examples present only apparent mismatches. Thus, the intuition that statuses come with powers can be preserved. In Section 1, I present the dual function theory of social objects. I use it to solve

the mismatch problem in Section 2. I then go on, in Section 3, to compare it to John Searle's (1995; 2010) status function theory. There I argue that the dual function theory is to be preferred to it because of its scope and explanatory power.

1. The Dual Function Theory

1.1. *Signaling Functions and Contributory Functions*

According to the dual function theory, social objects have functions. One of the functions of dollar bills, for instance, is to serve as a means of exchange. Such bills play important roles in the institution of money in the United States. An important function of the institution of money is to increase the efficiency of market transactions relative to barter economies. Dollar bills contribute to this by performing the function of a means of exchange. In this way, the function of the institution of money bears on the function that monetary objects have. A core claim of the dual function theory is that this holds more generally: social objects feature in social forms and the functions of the latter bear on the functions of the former. Social forms are defined by problems of social interaction, in particular coordination and cooperation problems. At the most abstract level, the function of a social form is to solve its defining problem and thereby generate collective benefits.²

The participants of a social form contribute to this by exercising the powers of the social objects that feature in them. But what powers do social objects have? Social objects can be distinguished on the basis of whether they figure in social practices or in institutions. Social practices are patterns in behavior, such as driving on the left side of the road or using shells as money. And institutions are social practices that are governed by norms, such as marriage or property (Tuomela 2013; Hindriks 2019). Social objects have causal powers, to wit dispositions to elicit behaviors. Institutional objects have deontic powers, which are rights or obligations. The function of a social form is to generate collective benefits *by performing such causal or deontic powers*.

As an example of a social object with causal powers, think of billboards along highways that indicate the presence of a restaurant at the next exit. They elicit certain behavior. More specifically, they trigger those who want to eat to take the next exit and eat something at the restaurant advertised. They thereby coordinate behaviors such that supply and demand meet. In principle, both producers and consumers benefit. Examples of institutional objects include passports that permit people to travel abroad, and IDs that permit people to buy alcohol. Deontic powers are matched by causal powers at least to some extent. This means that they are effective and can be exercised. Because they have both kinds of powers, institutional objects are social objects, but not *vice versa*.

The first and main function of social objects is to contribute to the performance of the functions of the social forms of which they are characteristic. Social objects facilitate and enable social forms to generate collective benefits.

They do so by means of the causal or deontic powers that they possess. This is their *contributory function*. Elsewhere I have argued that social forms feature social mechanisms (Hindriks 2017). Here the idea is that social objects form the nuts and bolts, or perhaps rather the cogs in such mechanisms. Cogs are supposed to facilitate or enable, or to contribute to the functioning of the mechanism of which they are part. Thus, they owe those powers in part to the social forms in which they figure, including in particular the attitudes that support them.³

Social objects also have symbolic features that help people to figure out how to coordinate or cooperate in the context at issue. Wedding rings help married and unmarried people to coordinate by facilitating them to determine who are suitable targets for dating and mating. They signal who is available and who is not. Parking meters and signs indicate that drivers have to pay for parking their cars. They indicate or signal how to cooperate in this respect. Because of this, social objects can be seen as signaling devices. They signal mutually beneficial opportunities for interaction. This is their *signaling function*. Social objects perform this function by means of markers, which are salient properties of those objects (Haslanger 2000).⁴

The function of the institution of money is to make exchanges more efficient as compared to bartering. Dollar bills contribute to this because they are a means of exchange, which means that they have purchasing power. This consists of the (second-order) right and ability to change the distribution of property rights. In the United States, the institution of money performs its function in part by people exercising this deontic power. But how do people know which objects to use as money? To this end, they rely on markers that enable them to converge on one and the same object. Think, for instance, of the widely known fact that the face of George Washington features on one-dollar bills.

Thus, the core of the dual function theory can be summarized in terms of a claim about the signaling function (*SF*) of social objects and their contributory function (*CF*):

(*SF*) The signaling function of social entities is to inform agents of how to coordinate or cooperate by means of their markers.

(*CF*) The contributory function of social entities is to enable coordination and cooperation by means of their powers.

A central insight of the dual function theory is that it is partly due to social objects, their powers and their markers that the interactions in which people engage within social forms provide collective benefits.

1.2. Constitutive Rules

The dual function theory can be given more content in terms of the notion of a constitutive rule. Inspired by Amadeo Conte (1988), I take a constitutive rule to

consist of two rules, a status rule and a base rule (Hindriks 2013b). A status rule (*SR*) explicates a status (*Y*) in terms of its characteristic social powers (*Z*):

(*SR*) *Y* is *Z*

Thus, being *Y* is a matter of having the power to do *Z*. For instance, money is a means of exchange. As such, it provides the person who has it with purchasing power. In this case, the link between the status and its powers is in fact conceptual. This need not be the case, however. Consider the definition of “wedding ring” as “a ring worn by a married person, given to them by their spouse at their wedding” (Oxford Dictionary of English). This definition remains silent about its social powers.

Status objects depend on what I call “basic objects.” More specifically, they are constituted by basic objects of a type that is generally accepted to have a status. This can be explicated in terms of a second kind of rule, a “base rule.” A base rule (*BR*) specifies the basic type of object that is constitutive of status object.⁵ It enumerates the basic conditions (*X*) that an object has to meet in order to have a status (*Y*) in the context at issue (*C*). Many objects, such as pieces of paper and golden rings, are especially created in order to constitute status objects. However, they do so only within the appropriate context:⁶

(*BR*) *X* is *Y* in *C*

Thus, *any* object that is *X* in *C* has status *Y* and thereby is a status object. To be sure, a status term (*Y*) is nothing more than a label for a status that is specific to a particular context (*C*), such as “euro” for money in the Eurozone. However, this label stands for a set of powers (*SR*). Furthermore, the *X*-term specifies all the conditions that an object has to meet in order to have this status in that context. For instance, euro bills are made of cotton fiber, they feature a picture of a bridge on the back, have a portrait watermark and hologram, and they must have been issued by the European Central Bank or a national central bank of the Eurosystem. Finally, together a *BR* and a *SR* form a dual constitutive rule.

So, how do base rules and status rules shed light on the two functions of social objects? The properties of basic objects are often instrumental to the contributory functions of the status objects they constitute. According to economic theory, whatever is used as money should be durable, divisible, and transportable. Presumably, this explains why pieces of metal and paper have been popular as basic objects.⁷ A further instrumental property economists attribute to money is that it should be difficult to counterfeit. The underlying idea, in my terms, is that it is important for pieces of metal and paper to be the real thing in order for them to reliably perform their contributory function.

Wedding rings have a *SF* due to which they coordinate behaviors between married and unmarried people. They do so by indicating whether someone is married. Due to a number of observable features, people recognize certain rings as wedding rings. They thereby indicate that a person wearing such a ring is married.

Because of the norms that are associated with such rings, they also serve a contributory function. Unmarried people are not supposed to make advances to married people, and *vice versa*. Married people benefit to the extent that they do not receive unwelcome advances. Unmarried people avoid embarrassing encounters and wasting time on those who are not available. Furthermore, wedding rings can help people not to give into temptation, which serves to stabilize marriages. In these ways, wedding rings help secure the collective benefits of marriage.

Both kinds of rules specify properties that are constitutive of status objects in different ways (Hindriks 2013a). Powers are, at least in many cases, constitutive of statuses in the conceptual sense. Basic properties are metaphysically necessary for an object having a status. In order for a dual constitutive rule to be in force, it has to be generally accepted.⁸ I use the term “type acceptance” for acceptance of a rule. The reason for this is that someone who accepts a BR thereby accepts a type of object that tokens thereof have the relevant status. People can also accept a token as having a status, as when a piece of paper is accepted as genuine after it has been checked by a counterfeit money detector.

Acceptance is a core determinant of how well social objects perform their contributory function. This can be illustrated in terms of an Italian proverb about traffic lights: in Milan, they are instructions; in Rome, they are suggestions; and in Naples, they are decorations. This suggests that they function properly in Milan, that they malfunction in Rome, and that they do not function at all in Naples. These differences in how they function can be explained at least partly in terms of the different attitudes that drivers in these cities have toward traffic lights, if not toward traffic rules more generally.

2. The Mismatch Problem

2.1. *Statuses and Powers*

The dual function theory of social objects is committed to what I call “the matching thesis” (*MT*):

(MT) An entity that has a particular status necessarily has the powers that are characteristic of that status.

In other words, statuses and powers stand or fall together. This follows immediately from the status rule, which equates statuses with powers; it has as its structure: *Y* is *Z*. In many cases, the two are equivalent by definition.

MT can be challenged in two ways. First, it might be possible for status objects to lack their concomitant powers. Second, objects might have powers without the corresponding statuses. A damaged dollar bill that is not accepted as a means of payment is an example of the former; a counterfeit dollar bill that is accepted as the real thing is an example of the latter (Almäng 2016; Smith 2003). Consider also a valid ID that a bar tender mistakes for a fake one and a fake ID that is accepted as a valid one. In the introduction, I referred to these two kinds of

cases as “failing originals” and “passing forgeries.” Such cases have been taken to suggest that there can be double dissociations between statuses and powers. The mismatch problem is the challenge of accommodating alleged counterexamples in a way that preserves the matching thesis.

The examples just presented are incidental cases. However, a dissociation between statuses and powers can also be systematic. Smith (2003) imagines that Albania is flooded with fake U.S. dollar bills. The pieces of paper are accepted as dollar bills in Albania. However, they are counterfeit, “as would become clear immediately were any of them to be presented for payment in an American bank” (Ibid., 293). It could also happen that originals fail on a systematic basis. Imagine, for instance, that at some point people in the U.S. stop accepting dollar bills altogether, perhaps due to hyperinflation. This raises the question whether they are still money.

Failing originals and passing forgeries also have been taken to present a challenge to the idea that status objects can be explicated in terms of constitutive rules. Smith presents his example as a challenge to John Searle’s (1995) claim that constitutive rules have as their structure “*X counts as Y in C.*” He claims that the pieces of paper are counted as money without being money. And he concludes that constitutive rules cannot determine what money is. Almäng (2016) challenges my account of status rules, which explicate statuses in terms of powers. He regards the damaged dollar as a counterexample to this proposal: he takes it to have a status but not the concomitant power.⁹

Some other examples concern social roles rather than objects. Just as social objects, social roles are individuated by their powers.¹⁰ Furthermore, someone who occupies a role has a certain status. Joshua Rust (2017) imagines the presidency being stripped of its powers. If this were to happen, the claim is, someone would have the status of a president without having the relevant powers. Another example with the same structure is that of a police officer who is suspended. In a sense, these are examples of failing originals.

Miller (2001, 186) considers the role of being a surgeon, which involves a mix of deontic and causal powers. A licensed surgeon has the right to practice surgery. But successfully exercising this right requires skills, which are causal powers. Miller considers a licensed but incompetent surgeon—I will call him “Alex”—who is quite adept at hiding his lack of skills. In this respect, the example resembles that of a passing counterfeit. Miller argues that, because he lacks the skills, Alex is not really a surgeon. This in spite of the fact that, legally, he is a surgeon. The underlying idea is that, when it comes to institutional roles such as being a surgeon, causal powers take priority over deontic powers.

I discuss social roles in Section 2.4. In Sections 2.2 and 2.3, I discuss social objects: first incidental cases and then and systematic cases.

2.2. *Social Objects: Incidental Cases*

Two distinctions that are of vital importance for solving the mismatch problem are that between type and token acceptance and that between having

a social power and exercising it. The crucial point to appreciate, I propose, is that having a status along with its powers requires type acceptance, while exercising a power requires token acceptance. This is what I call “the power thesis” (*PT*):

(*PT*) Type acceptance is necessary for having a status and its powers; token acceptance is necessary only for exercising powers.

In order for objects of some kind to have a particular status, the participants in a social practice have to accept that such objects have that status. As discussed in Section 2, such type acceptance is a matter of them generally accepting the relevant base rule. In addition to this, exercising the powers of a status object requires token acceptance: the particular object that has the status must be accepted as having it in the context in which its power is exercised. A passport enables you to travel abroad, for instance, only when it is accepted as valid by the customs officer.¹¹

The power thesis helps to understand why originals can fail. The mismatch problem assumes that objects that cannot be used for exercising certain powers do not have them. But in the examples presented, the objects do have the relevant status. Hence, they are taken to reveal that powers can come apart from statuses. The thing to appreciate, however, is that the assumption is mistaken: *it does not follow* from the fact that certain powers cannot be exercised that the objects do not have them. Originals fail due to a lack of token acceptance. But they still have their status along with its powers due to type acceptance. The power thesis supports both of these claims.

Consider a 21-year-old American student who wants to buy a beer in a bar. The bartender does not accept his ID as valid, even though it is. It is valid due to type acceptance: it is generally accepted that *X* is *Y* in *C*, and the card is of type *X*. What is lacking is token acceptance. The bartender does not acknowledge that the card is of type *X*. Because of this, the ID does not suitably signal the student’s status, which means that he cannot exercise its powers and buy a beer. It does not follow, however, to conclude that the ID card has lost its powers. Bartenders in other bars will in all likelihood accept it. Thus, the status and its powers do not come apart, which means that there is no genuine mismatch.

Passing forgeries, such as a fake ID that passes as a valid one, present more of a challenge. Suppose that a 21-year-old student uses it to buy a beer. It might seem that, because the object is used for this purpose, having the relevant power can come apart from having the status. However, the object does not really have the relevant power. Instead, it appears that way. And, because of this, the token is accepted as having a status that it does not have. Furthermore, it is used *as if* it has the power. In other words, it mimics it. This can be captured by modifying the power thesis as follows (*PT**):

(*PT**) Type acceptance is necessary for having a status and its powers; token acceptance is necessary only for exercising powers *and sometimes sufficient for mimicking powers*.

What passing forgeries reveal is that, at least some of the time, token acceptance enables people to use an object for some purpose. This in spite of the fact that other objects are supposed to be used for that purpose.

This third part of the power thesis should be understood against the background of a social form in which a BR is generally accepted. In the example just used, this means that there is a BR in place for IDs. And it may well be that there are plenty of cards (*Xs*) that are valid IDs (*Ys*). However, the token at issue is a fake (not *X*). Hence, it does not have the relevant status (not *Y*). Even so, it is accepted as having the status. More precisely, it is mistaken for an object meets the relevant conditions and therefore accepted *as if* it has the status. One question is how this can happen. As discussed above, people rely on markers in order to recognize an object as having a status. And markers and people are not perfectly reliable. The further question is why forgeries are sometimes successful. How can objects without a status sometimes mimic the powers of that status?

The first thing to note is that actually doing something does not entail having the power to do so (Dowding and Van Hees 2008). In other words, sometimes agents can do things they lack the power to do. Think of an average-sized man who would normally fail were he to try to lift a car. However, when his wife is trapped under a car, he does succeed to lift it and save her. In a sense, his doing so is a fluke. It is due to extraordinary circumstances. Because he would normally fail, it is appropriate to say that he lacks the power to perform an action he just performed. Thus, he mimics the power in the sense that he does something that would normally require a power he does not have.

This argument presents a problem for the proponents of the mismatch problem. They rely on the mistaken inference from an object doing something to it having the power to do so. Yet, it does not provide a complete response. The fact that the student with the fake ID is served a beer might indeed be a fluke. As such, it need not reflect a power of his or his card. However, this does not explain why it can be used in this way. Furthermore, this line of argument does not generalize from incidental cases to the systematic cases that I go on to discuss next. All I can conclude at this point is that, strikingly, it sometimes suffices for a forgery to be used as if it were the real thing that the particular object, the token, is mistakenly accepted as having the status.

2.3. *Social Objects: Systematic Cases*

An object can also fail or pass on a systematic basis, across a wide range of circumstances. Almäng (2016) considers a real but damaged dollar bill that is treated as a forgery everywhere. Similarly, a fake dollar might pass in all circumstances. Smith's (2003) Albania example is general in another respect: Albania is flooded with fake dollar bills that are accepted as valid throughout the country. It could also happen that U.S. Americans stop using dollar bills altogether even though they are still valid. As I discuss below, the number of objects that pass or fail makes a difference to how tempting it is to regard them as the real thing.

The damaged dollar bill is an example of a failing original. This suggests that it can be accounted for in terms of a lack of token acceptance (*PT**). The example differs in one respect from the valid ID example discussed in Section 2.2. The ID is refused on a single occasion by a single bartender. The damaged dollar is rejected across circumstances. Hence, rather than incidental, the lack of token acceptance is systematic in this case. Even so, those who treat the damaged dollar as a forgery are simply mistaken. It is a valid dollar bill, “as would become clear immediately were it presented to an American bank.”¹² Because of this, it has the same purchasing power as any other. However, it cannot be used as a means of exchange in practice because of how people respond to the fact that it is damaged.

Almäng (2016) cannot accept this diagnosis. He believes that having a status along with its powers requires not only type acceptance, but also token acceptance. This means that he rejects the first part of the power thesis (*PT*).¹³ Almäng infers from the fact that the dollar bill cannot be used as a means of payment that it does not have its powers. However, this does not follow. It might be that, because the circumstances are extraordinary, the powers of the object are masked. Just as doing something does not entail having the power to do it, failing to do something does not imply a lack of power (the ability or power of a pianist with stage fright is masked when on stage). To be sure, the object is in some sense defective. However, a bank would exchange it for an undamaged dollar bill. This reveals that it has not lost its powers altogether.

Smith’s (2003) Albania example concerns passing forgeries. He presents the example as a challenge to the role of acceptance in relation to constitutive rules. This can be defused by invoking the distinction between type and token acceptance. Type acceptance, or acceptance of a base rule, is what determines whether an object is genuine or fake (*PT*). This claim is not undermined by the fact that token acceptance sometimes enables people to use a forgery as if it were the real thing. But the question remains how to explain why the forgeries pass for the real thing. Each of them is mistakenly accepted as having the status. In Section 2.2, I proposed that this explains why these objects mimic its powers (*PT**). When this is a fluke, this is perhaps not so surprising. But how can it occur on a systematic basis?

This can be explained in terms of the distinction between causal and deontic powers. In order for deontic powers to be effective, they have to be matched by causal powers. No beer has been sold if the beer does not actually change hands. However, causal powers can exist independently of deontic powers. It is perfectly well possible to hand over a beer without making a sale. Now, the transfers that take place using fake dollar bills are observationally indistinguishable from genuine market exchanges. And the causal processes are identical. However, because the dollar bills are forgeries, no legitimate market exchanges have taken place. Thus, I propose that deontic powers can be mimicked in that only the corresponding causal powers are exercised.

Strikingly, all alleged counterexamples concern institutional statuses, which are defined in terms of deontic powers. This allows for the possibility that the

relevant objects have the causal powers but not the deontic powers. They lack the deontic powers because they do not belong to the type of object that is accepted as having them. They possess the causal powers because they are mistaken for status objects. Even though the causal process is the same, it cannot adequately be described in institutional terms, because the pieces of paper do not have the status and the concomitant deontic powers. In light of this, passing forgeries do not pose a problem for the matching thesis: the forged dollar bills lack both the statuses and the deontic powers. Thus, there is no mismatch.

However, the longer this practice of using the forgeries as an apparent means of exchange exists, the more difficult it becomes to deny that the pieces of paper are money, or so it seems. Whether or not this is the case, however, it should be clear that they will not be U.S. dollar bills. They are not Xs, if only because they have not been issued by the Federal Reserve. Hence, they are not Ys. Now, suppose that years later the Albanians discover that the dollar bills that are in circulation are forgeries. How would they respond? One option would be that they cease to use the dollar bills. The other option is that they do not care and keep on using them. If that is what happens, the Albanians in effect adopt a BR according to which certain fake dollars are money. And at that point, and not earlier, do the fake dollars become real money. They would become a kind of *ersatz* money similar to the cigarettes Allied prisoners of war used as money in World War II. In this way, forgeries can be so successful that they acquire a new status.

Thus, even though the systematic cases pose a bigger challenge to the matching thesis than the incidental ones, the diagnosis is ultimately the same. Tokens acceptance can be out of sync with type acceptance, whether incidentally or on a systematic basis. Hence, the matching thesis survives these counterexamples as well.

2.4. *Social Roles*

The final challenge concerns social roles. As discussed in Section 2.1, someone who occupies a role has a certain status, which consists of one or more powers. Think, for instance, of the power of the U.S. president to veto certain laws, or of that of a teacher to give a pupil detention for throwing a temper tantrum. Social roles resemble social objects in other respects as well. In order to have a status, a person has to meet the conditions that feature in a base rule.¹⁴ Furthermore, that BR has to be generally accepted in order to be in force (type acceptance). When that is the case, any person who meets the basic conditions has the relevant status along with its powers. Because of these parallels, “originals” can also fail, and “forgeries” can also pass. And they can be dealt with as before.

It has been argued, however, that social roles give rise to new, different counterexamples to the matching thesis. The first one concerns people who have statuses without powers. Rust (2017) imagines that the presidency be stripped of its powers. This implies that the president plays a merely ceremonial role (as in Germany). It also means that the mismatch problem does not arise. After all,

there are no powers associated with a status. It is informative to compare this case to one in which someone has been temporarily stripped of his powers, such as a suspended police officer. The thing to see is that their status is diminished to the exact same extent as their powers. This means that the (reduced) powers in fact *match* the (diminished) status. The term “suspended” marks the fact that they are not ordinary police officers. They have what I propose to call “a truncated status.”

The second counterexample concerns the skills required for fulfilling roles. Recall Alex, the incompetent surgeon. Miller (2001, 186) claims that Alex is not a surgeon because he lacks the requisite skills. This in spite of the fact that he acknowledges that Alex does have the corresponding legal powers. Interpreted as the claim that Alex seems to have the status without the concomitant causal powers, this presents a challenge to the matching thesis (*MT*). However, the status of a surgeon is an institutional status. As such, it is defined in terms of deontic powers. A surgeon is a licensed doctor who is thereby legally qualified to perform medical operations. This means that, given that Alex has the deontic powers, he is a surgeon. So, there is no mismatch after all. *Pace* Miller, deontic powers take priority over causal powers.

Social statuses, in contrast, stand or fall together with their causal powers. Consider Alexia, who has the skills to cure people. She has become the go-to person for people who fall ill in her community. As in this community there are no licenses for curing people, she does not have any of the deontic powers that Alex has. However, she does have the relevant skills. Furthermore, she gets to exercise them within the context of a social practice. This is due to the fact that it is generally accepted that people who are like her in relevant respects have the corresponding causal powers. Now, if Alexia loses her skills, she ceases to be a doctor. And, by the matching thesis, if she loses the powers, then she loses the status. This means that Miller’s intuition holds for social rather than for institutional roles. Even so, it still does not undermine the matching thesis.

But why are there institutional roles, in addition to social ones? To an important extent, this is to determine who gets to engage in which activities and to thereby secure that those who do have the requisite skills. Access to institutional roles is limited by degrees and licenses. These in turn are markers of or proxies for skills.¹⁵ They can be seen as signaling devices that serve to coordinate behaviors between those who offer a particular service and those who are looking for it. And they thereby enable people to engage in transactions that are not just based on scarcity but also on the basis of quality. This reveals that, just as social objects, social roles have signaling and contributory functions. It follows that, in addition to acceptance, the functioning of an institution depends also on skills. In this way, this exploration of social roles enriches understanding of the functioning of social forms.

Thus, the dual function theory solves the mismatch problem in all of its guises. It does so in terms of the distinction between type- and token-acceptance on the one hand, and the distinction between having and exercising a power on the other hand. A failing original falls under the BR that is in force (type acceptance). As such, it has the relevant status along with its concomitant powers. However,

it cannot exercise those powers because it is not accepted as having the status (no token acceptance). In contrast, a passing forgery does not fall under a base rule, which means that it has neither status nor powers (no type acceptance). However, it can do the same thing as a status entity, on occasion or over a wide range of circumstances. Because it is accepted as having the status, it mimics its powers.

3. The Status Function Theory

The mismatch problem arose as a challenge to Searle's (1995) social ontology (Miller 2001; Smith 2003). I have argued that the dual function theory (*DFT*) solves it due to its commitment to the matching thesis (*MT*):

(*MT*) An entity that has a particular status has the powers that are characteristic of that status.

Searle's theory revolves around the notion of a status function. A status consists of deontic powers. And a status function is performed by exercising its deontic powers. I refer to it as "the status function theory." This theory supports the following thesis about the relation between statuses and powers (*MT**):

(*MT**) Status functions are necessarily connected with deontic powers.

This thesis follows directly from Searle's claim that "there is an essential connection between status function and deontic power" (2008, 31). *MT** differs from *MT* in that it does not carry a commitment to entities that have social properties. Searle is an anti-realist about the social. As such, he is committed only to social and institutional facts.¹⁶ Two other differences are that, whereas *MT* features the terms "status" and "power", *MT** uses instead the terms "status function" and "deontic power." Although these two differences may appear small, they will turn out to have significant consequences.

In response to Smith's (2003) Albanian dollars example, Searle (2003) claims that there are criteria for counting something as a dollar that "should prevail over the actual practices in question" (Searle 2003, 301). This is in line with the solution that I have proposed above. The idea would be that the actual practices in which the forgeries circulate are based on token acceptances, and that the criteria are, in my terms, the basic conditions of a base rule, which pertains to the type. Although Searle does not, as far as I know, draw a distinction between having a power and exercising it, he does not exclude it either. Hence, *SFT* is consistent with the power thesis according to which having a power requires type acceptance, while exercising a power requires token acceptance. It follows that Searle, or any other proponent of *SFT*, can adopt the solutions that I have proposed to the mismatch problem.

In spite of this, there is ample reason to prefer *DFT* to *SFT*. First, the scope of Searle's theory is relatively small, because it is restricted to a particular kind of deontic power. Because of this, it excludes objects and roles that consist only

of causal powers, such as billboards and doctors such as Alexia.¹⁷ Furthermore, as Searle (1995, 2010) uses the term, only prescriptions, prohibitions and permissions are deontic powers. As a consequence, *SFT* excludes second-order deontic powers such as Hohfeldian powers and immunities. These are rights that enable an agent to change first-order rights and obligations (Wenar 2015). For instance, a CEO has the right to fire people and thereby take away their privileges. Similarly, a judge has the power to silence someone in court. Strikingly, Searle's favorite example, money, also requires a broader conception of deontic powers than the one he relies on, as it consists of the ability to change the distribution of property rights. Hence, *SFT* also excludes some of the more complex and important institutional objects and roles. This means that its scope—and thereby the scope of its solution to the mismatch problem—is substantially smaller than that of *DFT*.

The second problem concerns the notion of a status function. It suggests that *SFT* does not allow statuses and functions to come apart. This is problematic, because statuses come with powers and functions and powers can come apart. To be sure, an entity performs a function by exercising one of its powers. However, it can do the latter without achieving the former. For instance, humans procreate by having sex, but they can have sex without procreating. Similarly, health-promoting surgeries are performed by licensed surgeons, but licensed surgeons can perform surgeries without promoting health. Thus, the relation between functions and the powers by means of which they are performed is contingent. What I call “the match problem” is this: even though they can come apart in practice, functions and powers necessarily match in theory. That *SFT* suffers from this problem follows immediately from *MT**, according to which the relation between the two is necessary. Given that they can come apart, *MT** must be mistaken. The upshot is that, although the relation between statuses and powers is necessary, the relation between powers and functions is not.

Searle (1995, 16) relies on a teleological conception of a function, according to which to impose a function to an entity is to assign a purpose to it. The function or purpose of a status is for its deontic powers to be exercised. Recall that an entity performs its function by exercising its powers. This implies that a status function is performed by exercising its deontic powers. However, given that its function is for its deontic powers to be exercised, it also follows that, by exercising its deontic powers, the status function is performed. This is why *SFT* succumbs to the match problem. There is a double association between functions and powers.

The match problem is not inherent to the teleological concept of a function. Suppose that the purpose of a status is to realize some value. It might be that its powers are exercised without this value materializing. This would mean that the status function is not performed. Thus, the match problem can be solved by introducing an account of the values that are realized by exercising deontic powers. However, *SFT* does not feature such an account. The problem can be avoided altogether by adopting a causal or etiological concept of function, as *DFT* does.

In Section 1.1, I proposed that the function of social practices and institutions is to generate collective benefits. This is their etiological function. This means that the fact that a social form performs a particular function explains both why it is there and why it persists (Wright 1973; Millikan 1993).

Objects and agents can play a CF with respect to social forms in that they facilitate or enable them to perform their function. This means that they play a role in the social mechanism that constitutes the social form. A dissociation between the function of an entity and its powers is possible because the relation between them is a causal one. It is invariant over some but not all circumstances. As such, it allows for exceptions. In particular, it allows for the possibility that the powers of an object are exercised, but that its CF is not performed. This means that, in cases in which they are, *DFT* can provide a genuine explanation of how social entities contribute to the existence and persistence of social forms. Thus, *DFT* possesses a kind of explanatory power that *SFT* lacks.¹⁸

The upshot is that *DFT* is to be preferred over *SFT*. First, *DFT* provides for a solution to the mismatch problem that is more general than that of *SFT*. And second, *DFT* has more explanatory power than *SFT* such that it does not suffer from the match problem.¹⁹

4. Conclusion

The function of social practices and institutions is to generate collective benefits. I have argued that this claim sheds light on the nature of social objects and roles. According to the dual function theory presented here, social entities have themselves two functions. The CF of social objects and roles is to facilitate or enable this by means of their social powers. Their SF is to indicate mutually beneficial opportunities for interaction that involve such objects and roles. I have defended the theory further by arguing that it solves the mismatch problem, the challenge that statuses and powers can come apart. Sometimes the power of a status is masked (failing originals). In other cases, an entity that does not have the status mimics the power (passing forgeries).

Thus, the dual function theory supports the matching thesis according to which *statuses necessarily come with powers*. Its main rival, the status function theory, maintains that statuses and their powers are also necessarily related to functions. Against this, I have argued that *the relation between powers and functions is contingent*. Even though functions are performed by exercising powers, it is possible for a power to be exercised while the function is not performed. Licenses for surgeons are meant to promote health. Even so, licensed surgeons can perform surgeries without achieving this. In light of this, I have argued that the relation between powers and functions is causal. The upshot is that statuses and powers always go together, while powers and functions can come apart.

Notes

- ¹I take the term “mismatch problem” from Mallon (2017) who uses it for a different problem, which concerns the fact that some social constructs involve widespread false beliefs. He argues that this poses a problem for referring to them, if not for their very existence.
- ²See Schotter (1981, 22 and 44), Tuomela (2007; 2013, 229) and Hindriks and Guala (2019). Section 3 discusses the notion of a function.
- ³Contributory functions are akin to Cummins’ (1975) role functions (see also Craver 2001).
- ⁴In coordination games, social objects are signaling devices in a more technical sense: they correlate and coordinate behaviors in mutually beneficial ways. As such, they give rise to what is known as “correlated equilibria” and are also known as “correlating devices” (Aumann 1974; 1987; Vanderschraaf 1995; Gintis 2007). Correlating devices also create novel opportunities for coordination (Tuomela 2013; Guala and Hindriks 2015; Hindriks and Guala 2015).
- ⁵Searle’s (1995; 2010) account of constitutive rules only features analogues of base rules. Searle’s (1972) explication of the institution of property in terms of its constitutive rules makes abundantly clear that this will not do, as property necessarily involves a number of rights, in particular the right of use, exclusion and transfer.
- ⁶An entity can be a basic entity relative to an institutional entity, even though it is itself an institutional entity. Thus, objects *X* are more basic than status objects *Y* in that the former (metaphysically) constitute the latter. However, they can themselves be institutional objects *Y** constituted by more basic objects *X**. In this respect, it resembles Anscombe’s (1958, 71) use of the term “brute fact.”
- ⁷There are, however, striking exceptions to this. Objects that have been used as money range from cigarettes to large circular stone disks carved out of limestone (Welch and Welch 2010). The former are not durable, and the latter are not divisible and transportable.
- ⁸In fact, it often suffices if its BR is generally accepted. When a SR explicates the status concept, as in the case of money, people who accept the BR of a currency are thereby committed to regarding it as a means of exchange. When this is not hold, as in the case of a wedding ring, the SR has to be accepted separately.
- ⁹Almäng (2016) targets the account as presented in Hindriks (2012). There, I propose that status rules can be viewed as definitions of status terms. This should be seen as a theoretical proposal that does not always match dictionary definitions (see Section 1.2).
- ¹⁰According to functional role theory, social roles are shared normative expectations that prescribe and explain behavior (Biddle 1986). Although this theory is not current anymore, this core idea is still influential in sociology and social psychology. The notion of generally accepted deontic powers is rather similar to that of shared normative expectations.
- ¹¹When formal institutions are involved, type acceptance is indirect. People generally accept the authority of an organization that settles the conditions that a status object has to meet, such as a central bank.
- ¹²As mentioned in Section 2.1, Smith (2003, 293) uses a similar phrase in connection to forged dollar bills.
- ¹³Almäng (2016) relies on a distinction that is analogous to type and token acceptance: *de dicto* versus *de re* representations. In line with what I have proposed above, he maintains that “the fact that an object has a certain institutional status normally depends upon representations *de dicto*” (Almäng 2016, 9). In addition to this, however, he claims that facts about deontic powers and institutional functions also depend on *de re* representations. This entails that status entities do not have powers or functions in the absence of *de re* representations.
- ¹⁴In support of this claim, I argue elsewhere that constitution need not be a relation between objects, but can also be a relation between properties (Hindriks 2012; 2013a).
- ¹⁵Whereas the markers of social objects are usually observable basic properties, the markers of social roles are rarely observable characteristics of the people who occupy them. Instead, invisible roles

are often made visible by means of objects associated to them. Think of mayoral chains or of the white coats that nurses and doctors wear in hospitals.

- ¹⁶Searle is most explicit about this in a recent paper entitled “Are There Social Objects?” The answer turns out to be a resounding “no” (Searle 2014). See Baker (2019) for a critical discussion of Searle’s anti-realism.
- ¹⁷Searle (1995) distinguishes between social and institutional facts. However, social facts involve intentional states that are irreducibly collective. As such, they pertain, for instance, to people acting together. They do not concern social statuses that come with causal powers.
- ¹⁸A further difference is that *DFT* is partly based on an equilibrium account of social practices and institutions, which *SFT* rejects. When commenting on Hindriks and Guala (2015), Searle claims that the contribution of equilibrium accounts “to the theory of institutional ontology is zero, nothing” (2015, 513).
- ¹⁹This discussion of the match problem provides further support for my earlier claim that *SFT* would be better off without the notion of a function (Hindriks 2013b). See Hindriks and Guala (2019) for an alternative framework that combines an etiological with a teleological perspective.

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