PART II

Criticisms and Reconstructions
Searle’s Foole

How a Constructionist Account of Society Cannot Substitute for a Causal One

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ABSTRACT. In The Construction of Social Reality, John Searle promises a causal account of how social facts are constructed by human acts of intention, but specifically disavows a special theoretical space in that account for human motivation. This paper argues that such a story as Searle tells cannot serve as a causal account of society. A causal account must illuminate motivations, because doing so illuminates the aims and interests lacking which we cannot explain why these social practices come to be and not potential others. Thus Searle’s would-be account of society has a problem analogous to that of Hobbes, which Hobbes’s own Foole poses, and that Hobbes never answers to anyone’s satisfaction.

I

Hobbes’s Social Construction

Hobbes was the first to regard himself a natural scientist, for inquiring into “all things in the natural kingdom of God” by reason alone. He wrote that, like geometry, “civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves.” He was also the first to view social reality—commonwealth, as he called it—as a collective human construction. The raw materials from which commonwealth is made, according to Hobbes, are: (1) self-interested, goal-directed individuals, whose liberties extend precisely to the limits that others can impose on them, and (2) the laws of instrumental reason, a subset of the Natural Laws under which they live. Com-

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monwealth results from a bargain, struck by the light of instrumental reason, for the sake of peace and of the benefits that flow from it.

To be sure, commonwealth is made, according to Hobbes. But the making of commonwealth is difficult business. For there is bound to be a good deal of conflict of interest amongst those whose lives it would touch. And mutual trust cannot simply be assumed where there is conflict of interest. Now a contract that either party is at liberty to violate if it should be profitable to do so is not worthy of the name, much less the trouble it takes to strike it. For such a contract will create no constraint that does not exist already and upon which would-be contractors can already rely for potential benefits. Hobbes’s answer to this problem is what he called the Third Law of Nature: “That men performe their Covenants made: without which [law], Covenants are in vain, and but Empty words; and the Right of all men to all things remaining, wee are still in the condition of Warre.” But how exactly does this Third Law emerge out of the instrumental reason on which rests the whole of civil society? According to David Gauthier, Hobbes’s answer is that once a bargain is struck, the parties are no longer entitled to use the unconstrained instrumental reason that brought them to the brink of covenant: instrumental reason cannot cross over the threshold with the parties themselves. Thus, unconstrained instrumental reasoning is scaffolding that must be dispensed with once a bargain is struck—and this is a logical condition of there coming to be a bargain in the first place. If nothing is ever laid down, in the way of entitlement, when a bargain is struck, no bargain is actually struck.

The John Searle of *Speech Acts* gives us the vocabulary to describe this answer (if we agree with Gauthier that it is in fact Hobbes’s own). He gives us the wherewithal to say that Hobbes has articulated the constitutive conditions for covenant—the conditions of satisfaction for an utterance on the part of one party to count as a sincere promise or covenant—namely, that thereafter the utterance gives the promisee a title to the behavior set forth in the utterance. But in the same stroke, *Speech Acts* gives us also the vocabulary to raise a very serious objection to Hobbes’s account: What could possibly serve as motivation for someone to enter into a genuine covenant in the first place, when
insincerity would serve that someone better? True, the state of nature
is war, and war is unprofitable, but this does not show that it serves
someone better to extend a sincere promise than merely to give the
appearance of so doing while actually not doing so. The account of
how (true) obligations get established does not itself establish that
the choice of war is not, in spite of its obvious repercussions, the
more prudent choice nonetheless. This is the issue that Hobbes’s
Foole raises, and that is a matter of concern for any historical account
of commonwealth’s coming into being. And it is an issue to which
(as we can now put it) Hobbes answers by changing the subject to
the question of constitutive conditions.

The passage is familiar, and the point so well made, that one
wonders how Hobbes can have thought that he answered the Foole:

> The Foole hath sayd in his heart, there is no such thing as Justice, . . . seri-
sously alleging, that every mans conservation, and contentment, being com-
mitted to his own care, there could be no reason, why every man might
not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore also to make,
or not make, keep, or not keep Covenants, was not against Reason, when
it conduced to ones benefit. He does not therein deny, that there be
Covenants; and that they are sometimes broken, sometimes kept; and that
such breach of them may be called Injustice, and the observance of them
Justice: but he questioneth, whether Justice, . . . may not sometimes stand
with that Reason, which dictateth to every man his own good."5

Hobbes’s answer to the Foole’s motivational worries (the Third Law
of Nature) is thoroughly unsatisfactory simply because it sets down
ontological conditions of what it is to enter into genuine, sincere
covenant, instead of addressing the question of motivation—the ques-
tion of grounds for choice. Hobbes’s answer simply changes the
subject.

Now perhaps someone can give a satisfying motivational story
about how covenants of the sort Hobbes envisioned can come to be
struck, one that would present the parties as estimating the benefits
of (genuine) covenant as outweighing its costs. But such a story is
quite different from the one Hobbes himself wished to tell and, if
ture, then in fact fatal to the construction Hobbes aspired to achieve.
For on such a story the covenant is kept because the keeping is in
the long run to the advantage of each party, all things considered, whether there is breach on the other side or not. (On Hobbes’s would-be story, by contrast, the costs of keeping covenant often outweigh the benefits.) And thus, on this account, covenant does not function as a new type of constraint on the parties’ taking advantage. And so it does not require a Third Law. On this story, motivation is not restructured by covenant making.

John Searle, as I propose to show, in *The Construction of Social Reality* has a problem analogous to Hobbes’s if he insists on his account being an historical or causal one.

II

The World We Found

Searle tells us, first of all, the ontological story about how institutions are constituted. He says that we get institutions of all kinds, and with them social facts, by (roughly) counting things as other things. But he hopes to achieve more than this. He hopes to tell us also how institutions, as concrete practices in everyday life, originate. And furthermore how they explain—historically, as I like to put it; causally, as he likes to put it—a variety of further behaviors. He is much better than Hobbes on the ontological story, but no better on the causal or historical one.

One distinctive feature of Searle’s account, and one that has got him into considerable trouble, is that he helps himself to the notion of irreducible collective intending, the doctrine according to which many instances of goal-directed behavior among the likes of us cannot be thought of merely as summations of individual aims at individual goals—that, in other words, the enterprise of aiming collectively is irreducible to configurations of aiming individually, with knowledge that others are so aiming as well. Now I have no objections to irreducible collective intending, and indeed think we need it to explain very mundane achievements in human affairs, pertaining to coordination when no communication is possible. I mention the matter of collective intending as unproblematic simply to remove a possible misunderstanding, for it is not this feature at all that I shall say causes trouble for Searle’s would-be causal account.
Searle sets for himself the task of explaining, among other things, how—causally, that is—institutions come into being and pass out of existence, because plainly they do. His premise is that our very construction of things (by counting them as other things) has a causal function, on one side to erect the social structures we want brought into existence, and on the other side to dismantle what has been erected. And it shall be on this rock of history that Searle’s account, like Hobbes’s, founders. The point I shall try to make is this: we can agree it is perfectly right to say that, for example, this artifact of my making (whether on photographic paper or on canvas) is a picture of my son because (ontologically speaking) I take it to be so, but we also can refuse to accept the causal statement that the picture of my son, as such, passes out of existence when I cease to recognize it as such. Searle’s anticipatory move might be that in the move from I to we, and from pictures to social institutions we get a qualitative difference in phenomena we can explain as coming into being and passing away, but I will explain that the move does not succeed. Thus, Searle’s own Foole will proclaim that money cannot pass away, as money, once it has come into existence, and Searle will have nothing in his account to persuade the Foole otherwise.

III

Society as a System of Constitutive Rules

Searle tells us that money, which is a favorite example of his, comes into existence when we (either non-premeditating, or as conspirators who wish it brought on the scene) begin to treat certain specimens of a kind of article, say, pieces of paper, as a medium of exchange, and ultimately begin to see the articles individually as valuable. He does not deny that this practice can take hold and maintain itself even if no one ever verbalizes even to themselves the ontological condition that makes it possible (namely, that such and such articles count as money, under such and such circumstances). Even so, he wants to bestow some explanatory causal role on the ontological conditions in bringing off our treatment of intrinsically valueless objects as valuable: “We want to say that institutions like money... are systems of constitutive rules, and we want to know the role of that rule struc-
ture in the causal explanation of human behavior” (p. 140). To achieve this he introduces the notion of rule sensitivity:

The key to understanding the causal relations between the structure of the Background [the nonintentional materials that lie causally behind human competences] and the structure of social institutions is to see that the Background can be causally sensitive to the specific forms of the constitutive rules of the institutions without actually containing any beliefs or desires or representations of those rules. (p. 141)

Now, as Hubert Dreyfus so skillfully argues, this notion of rule sensitivity, and the subsequent account of how it functions to bring off behavior, is incompatible with the phenomenology of overlearned skills that might once have been first acquired through application of rules.9 But this is not one of my complaints. My first complaint is that the very notion of rule sensitivity, that there can be some part of the human biological organism that detects rules as rules, is in tension with Searle’s constructive metaphysics of the social. For to assert that there exists a non-intentional mechanism by which someone can detect rules as rules is already to give up the constructionist thesis he shares with Hobbes, namely, that rules are not brute features of the world. The very notion of a rule detector as such has no place in such a constructionist ontology, because on such a constructionist account, the rules constitutive of social institutions (particularly the unwritten ones, about promises, for example) are made, not found, objects. So, in particular the unwritten rules, as rules, have no place in a constructionist’s causal story of the social. My second complaint is that the causal story in which the ontological conditions play a central or at least prominent role is not possible in the first place. The first complaint first.

It is not that Searle has not thought about how a biological system might become sensitized to the presence of a constitutive rule. He has. (Similarly, Hobbes invented the Foole’s challenge himself.) But Searle’s account is no more successful than Hobbes’s. Searle writes:

I am saying that if you understand the complexity of the causation involved, you can see that often the person who behaves in a skillful way within an institution behaves as if he were following the rules, but not because he is following the rules unconsciously nor because his behav-
ior is caused by an undifferentiated mechanism that happens to look as if it were rule structured, but rather because the mechanism has evolved precisely so that it will be sensitive to the rules. (p. 146)

But saying so does not make it so. Consider what it would take, biologically speaking, for a mechanism to have evolved a rule sensitivity. It would have to be the case that a rule-sensitive mechanism, as such, is better able to cope with its environment than one that merely happens to look like it is rule-sensitive. (It does not matter how it happens to achieve the deceptive appearance.) But this does not make sense, particularly if social behavior is not just more behavior that has to be coped with, as constructionist Searle insists. Social behavior, as Searle insists, is social because it has the quality of either complying with or defying accepted rules (thus, because it has the quality of being subject to assessment of a socially instituted kind), not because it is different as behavior. So how can rule sensitivity, even if it were a metaphysical possibility, gain an evolutionary advantage over a sensitivity merely to brute behaviors and their brute consequences?

The point really is this. Searle is cheating in his reply to his behaviorist critic (or perhaps it is a would-be ally) when he sets the goal-posts as follows: that we have to explain (and the only way to do it is through appeal to the constitutive rules, as causally efficacious) the difference between the person who, when the baseball is pitched at him, simply eats it and the one whose response is rule-appropriate; the difference between the person who does not recognize any reason to do something after he has made a promise to do it and the one who does; the difference between the person who forms grammatical sentences and the one whose sentences are ungrammatical (p. 146). This laundry list does not distinguish between cases in which there is behavior to be coped with as brute behavior and those in which there is no brute, overt behavior. For the behaviorist is quite right to notice behavioral differences, which are differences of brute fact, that separate the parties in question, as well as differences in treatment that rule-competent individuals are treated to, in contrast with their rule-incompetent counterparts. Thus the behaviorist is entitled to the answer that the behavioral differences get explained in the

Thalos on Searle

111
ordinary way, as a means of an ongoing coping with the world of brute facts. Where there are potential behavioral differences, we do not require constitutive rules in the causal repertoire to explain the behavior we observe.

To be sure, Searle is right that there is something that requires explaining, namely, that there is a difference between the person who swings at the baseball purely because he wants to be invited again tomorrow and the one who behaves exactly the same way but performs his actions at least partly because it is the appropriate response to pitched baseballs. The difference lies in the purely psychological or motivational facts. And it is this difference, as a difference of psychology, that may or may not get cashed out in behavior. What Searle wants to do is to make a case that this sort of difference plays a role in sustaining the institution of baseball, causally speaking, and also plays a role in the eventual dismantling of institutions. But this difference cannot be part of the causal story as to how institutions get dismantled, as I now proceed to explain.

IV

A Foole and His Money

“The secret of understanding the continued existence of institutional facts,” Searle writes, “is simply that the individuals directly involved and a sufficient number of members of the relevant community must continue to recognize and accept the existence of such facts” (p. 117). When there is sufficiently widespread failure of recognition, the institution passes away. This is a statement of the ontological conditions that are required for there to be a passing away of an institution. It is not a statement of its causes. To explain causally the death or erosion of an institution, Searle will have to explain how people manage, causally, to withdraw recognition. And this will be the rub. Searle’s Foole hath said in his heart that money can never pass away. Can Searle convince him otherwise?

If I truly recognize an institution as legitimate, or simply as an extant institution, then how, on Searle’s account, can I withdraw this recognition without it turning out that the institution was never recognized in the first place? In other words, if I recognize some norm of
behavior as a norm (whether or not I find myself inclined to adhere to it), can Searle explain with the resources he has allowed himself how I manage in the course of human affairs, and for whatever reasons happen to be on hand at the moment, to withdraw recognition of it as a norm that before my withdrawal existed? This is structurally the converse of Hobbes’s problem, and the resemblance does not end there, as we shall see.

As long as people continue to behave as if they accept pieces of intrinsically worthless paper as valuable media of exchange, money remains in existence. But sometimes it happens that they cease so behaving. First they behave as if certain pieces of paper are valuable, then they behave as if the same items are worthless. Now all this can be said without saying anything about constitutive rules, or even causes, for that matter. As a first step, we can supplement this purely behavioral story with Searle’s ontological story, to the effect that when the certain pieces of paper are treated as valuable they are valuable, and when they are treated as worthless they are worthless. But this is no more a causal story than before. Suppose now we undertake Searle’s project—to tell a causal story—through the lens of the ontological story. Searle, I take it, has it in mind to tell the story this way: it is an effect of the fact that people cease to recognize certain articles as money that these certain articles subsequently become worthless. This would-be causal story will not do. Here is why.

If a certain social institution has gone out of existence, then there used to exist norms of assessing behavior that exist no more. On the constructionist story, this translates into the statement that we used to accept ways of assessing behavior that we no longer accept. When it is inquired why we no longer accept them, Searle, I take it, wants to say that for whatever reasons happen to move us on this occasion we no longer accept them at least partly because we notice enough others are similarly disposed not to accept them (or some such thing). Without the qualification, the norms, as norms, would be playing no causal role whatever in our behavior. But then it looks as if the alleged norms, which I am undertaking with you and a sufficient number of others to abolish, were not norms in the first place, prior to our abolitionist undertakings. For if it is indeed widespread acceptance that brings norms into existence, and if enough of us have already
delected from acceptance when finally the joint effort is exerted to abolish, then my part of the abolitionist enterprise, when it comes, is not so much an act that brings a demise to anything as one that acknowledges that demise. And so much is true of your effort as well. Of course, one may say that it is the *We*, with a capital *W*, that counts in bringing things into existence, not the *I*, but Searle will be unwilling to grant that there is another causal story to be told about why *We*, with a capital *W*, no longer recognize, once the contents of each of our individual we-intentions has been causally explained. (To his credit Searle has blocked this answer by his methodological individualism.)

I think the right story to tell about why people cease to recognize certain things as valuable is that they come to have reason to believe that these things can no longer serve the function they may or may not still be assigned, for any of a variety of possible (and historically important) reasons. And that no further withdrawal of recognition is required. Of course Searle too can notice the relevance to the causal story of beliefs to the effect that the intrinsically valueless items can no longer serve the function they have been assigned in the past. But on his account, it must be a failure to recognize—a failure of we-intentions—that plays, if not a lion’s share, then at least a rabbit’s of the causal story in the demise of the institution in question.

My point now is that once you cite people’s beliefs to the effect that a certain something can no longer serve a function it once served, you cannot go on to say that as a result of these beliefs, which are its causal antecedents, the function no longer gets imposed subsequent to that time unless you are also prepared, as Searle is not because he is a constructionist, to separate in time the imposition from the acceptance. The simple point here is that a condition’s being constitutive of something’s counting as a so-and-so cannot also be a causal antecedent to the coming into being of the so-and-so, nor can its cessation be a causal antecedent of the thing’s passing out of existence, because the temporal relations of the one are incompatible with those of the other. And this is not at all because we-intentions are not causally efficacious. To the contrary: it is because they are too efficacious. A failure of we-intentions is not necessary for an institution to pass out of existence, and it looks as if a case in which the
failure occurs is typically a case in which the institution in question has already passed away.

Searle’s troubles are thus a result of failing to respect the difference between the likes of screwdrivers and the likes of money vis-à-vis causal powers, although he himself takes care to mark this difference (see 123ff). To be sure, both have their functions imposed upon them by human activities (so that both functions are, in Searle’s vocabulary, agentive), but each function is performed differently. In the case of the screwdriver, the function of driving screws, once the screwdriver has been fashioned, can be performed whether or not any agent believes or continues to believe that the function can be fulfilled by the screwdriver. The screwdriver’s causal potentials can swing free, as it were, from our beliefs about them once the article itself has come into existence. This is not true of money. Money can fulfill the function imposed upon it only if we continue to believe that it can, or at least go about our business as if we do. Someone can come along in a thousand years, dig up a screwdriver from the rubble of our ruined civilization, and drive a screw with it, provided she can find one and the screwdriver has not fallen to bits. This is not true of our money, or our promise-making practices. And it is this difference between money and screwdrivers that is distinctive of institutional facts and that makes institutional reality, as distinctively institutional, causally inert. For it is not that we accept money as valuable that makes it have the causal powers it does, but rather it is the fact that we believe that we accept money as valuable (when there is sufficient agreement among us on this). Moreover, the acceptance need not be a causal antecedent of the belief, and pieces of paper would still be valuable. Thus acceptance is unnecessary, causally speaking. But it is also insufficient, since all the acceptance in the world in the face of widespread beliefs to the effect that the function cannot be performed by the relevant pieces of paper under the circumstances would not bring off, causally speaking, the existence of money. (And under such circumstances one wonders what acceptance amounts to when beliefs to the right effect are absent or untenable. Not even a hill of beans.)

Once we see this point, we recognize that acceptance as such is not what brings a practice into existence or sustains it any more than
withdrawal of acceptance, all by itself, can bring the practice to an end. All the heavy lifting is done by attendant beliefs, which can create the appearance of acceptance even when acceptance as such is missing. The fact that beliefs play a non-eliminative causal role throughout, a fact that Searle himself remarks upon early in his analysis, goes to show just how very differently social institutions function as compared with screwdrivers. When it comes to screwdrivers, all the causal work is done by the physical attributes of the thing; when it comes to social institutions, all the causal work is done by beliefs. And, throughout, no causal work is done by constitutive rules.

Searle’s mistake is that he is prepared to count altogether too much as causal storytelling, and in particular too much that involves appeal to the ontological dimension. It is a common mistake, for we are not taught early on in our education to mark the difference between a purely ontological story and a purely causal one. For example, a three-year-old’s attention is normally drawn to the ontological fact that warm is a combination of cold and hot, in other words, that warm is ontologically divisible, depending on both cold and hot for its existence as warm. But if that same three-year-old asks whether hot itself is a combination of different things, the answer is given in purely causal terms, for instance, that hot just comes from the tap as hot. The ontological story is not continued, for example, that hot and cold, as such, are indivisible, independent in relation to warm. A purely causal story is given instead. Therefore, keeping the distinction between ontological and causal vigilantly marked is a discipline in which we are normally not instructed, because (sadly) philosophy as such is not part of our everyday culture. We might pay the distinction lip service, but we do not always keep it in our hearts.

Programmatic Remarks

What can we conclude? Merely that Searle is not entitled to tell causal stories at the social level on the merits of his account of sociality alone. What Searle tells us about the ontological reality of the social is right, as far as it goes, but it cannot double as a causal story. To tell causal stories one also has, among other things, to cite widespread
beliefs as to whether or not the functions one may see oneself as imposing can be served by the entities onto which one is bestowing them under the circumstances. Thus, causal stories in the social domain are much more complicated than Searle gives them credit for being. This is not to say that what Searle says about social matters is false, but simply that it does not amount to causal storytelling. And to some extent Searle himself directs us, unwittingly but also unerringly, to this reality. For example, Searle tells us that one of the great illusions of the era is that “Power grows out of the barrel of a gun” when in fact power grows out of organizations and the enabling structures that attend them (pp. 117–18). He then writes, “[b]ecause institutions survive on acceptance, in many cases an elaborate apparatus of prestige and honor is invoked to secure recognition and maintain acceptance” (ibid.). Searle comes to the very brink of noticing what no one who reads this passage can fail to notice—namely, that it is much less plausible to say that the pomp and circumstance surrounding public figures secures acceptance than to say that it achieves the appearance (true or not) that acceptance has been achieved, and with it legitimacy. But to say the latter is to express a much more complex story about the relationship between acceptance and the appearance of acceptance, a story that must be told if we are to achieve a true picture of the causal nexus underlying institutional reality.

Now Searle may be thinking of institutions as causal in such a way as might not be troubled by my alleging that certain beliefs are non-eliminative from the causal story, and might even try to appropriate the point to his advantage. He might say that, positively, these beliefs cannot be done without, precisely for the reason that they themselves necessarily are part of the package of acceptance. Searle can indeed affirm the rhetorical question that I myself raised earlier: What does acceptance amount to, in the absence of certain attendant beliefs? But I will reply that, even if we concede that certain beliefs come in the acceptance package, this does not amount to saying that they cannot come alone, nor finally, that they (the beliefs alone) cannot do the causal, historical work of founding institutions on their own, no thanks to acceptance. Which is exactly the point: it might be the case that acceptance, as such, is not needed to do social institutions the
favor of bringing them into being or keeping them afloat. And agreement on the fact that beliefs as such are normally part of the acceptance package cannot circumnavigate this point.

Why does public opinion make a difference to the status of a political or social institution? What kind of difference is it that is made by those certain beliefs to the institutions that are the subject matter of those beliefs? Searle likes to say that the difference made is (among other things) a causal difference, and that the beliefs themselves stand in a causal relation to the constitutive rules for the institutions that they are about; the beliefs come about because the institutions they are about exist, and consequently the beliefs refer to those institutions. The point I have been leading up to is that this is not a good answer, any more than saying that we believe in other minds because they exist is a good answer.

The right way to approach the question of the difference that belief makes to the status of social institutions is first to identify the evolutionary pressure that makes the maintenance of such institutions prudent, and subsequently to identify the mechanisms whereby the institutions in question can be so maintained. We can bet that beliefs have something to do with the latter (the maintenance of institutions), but there is no guarantee that the constitutive rules will make any contribution to this evolutionary story, or that the evolutionary story will itself be a causal one.

My own view is that the typical evolutionary story is not a causal one, and that in particular stories about the social are not good candidates for causal storytelling. Therefore, it shall be desirable to be in a position to give evolutionary accounts that are not also causal stories. I believe that the evolutionary story as to why institutions of one sort or another are prudent to maintain has to do with the coordination of behavior; that the mechanism of this maintenance is a psychological capacity for perspective-taking; and that among the products of this capacity are we-intentions of the sort Searle describes. What’s more, that we-intentions of the requisite sort can come about only under favorable conditions, for example, only where beliefs are to the effect that certain articles are suited to the performance of functions we want performed. But this account as it stands is not plausibly viewed as a causal story, and certainly not one in which
constitutive rules as such play a causal role in the carriage of behavior, as now I wish to argue.

The term *perspective-taking* originated in the 1930s in the work of Jean Piaget and G. H. Mead.\(^{10}\) Together with the concept of *simulation*, that of perspective-taking now plays a role in the contemporary scientific writings of a school of cognitive and social psychologists, eminently represented by Paul Harris and Robert Selman, whose work is befriended by such philosophers as Stephen Stich and Robert Gordon.\(^ {11}\) (Rediscovery of perspective-taking has kindled criticism of the contemporary accounts of the developing mind in cognitive psychology, which has come to be known as the *theory theory*, according to which the capacity that underwrites a child’s coming to predict the action of another [such as that of an adult] is a proto-scientific, representational theory of other minds, which gets acquired in the normal course of human development.\(^ {12}\) I agree with Mead and Selman that “the human capacity to coordinate roles is both the source of a sense of self [as a social entity] and the core of social intelligence. . . . [P]utting oneself in another’s position and the subsequent consideration of one’s own actions from that alternative position is the *operation*, uniquely human, that allows for the existence of a [social] self” (Selman 1980: 24). Elsewhere I have endorsed perspective-taking as an account of how human beings coordinate; my account there amounts to an *acausal* account of social behavior, for my explanation of this social behavior does not proceed by illuminating causal antecedents, but rather by identifying reductions in degrees of freedom, as I will now endeavor to explain.

Ordinarily, when each of N persons has a decision to make that impacts also what each of the other N-1 persons will receive as a result of these N decisions, we suppose that there are N *degrees of freedom* in the situation, one for each decision maker. But if the parties to such a decision seek to coordinate their behaviors perfectly, they will seek to choose *as if* they were a single decision-making body, so that the number of degrees of freedom is reduced from N to 1 (and thereby also the potential for miscoordination). This, at least, is what happens in the ideal cases, in which the attempt to reduce degrees of freedom actually succeeds. When a group of N voters each has to cast a vote for one of two candidates, and there are two
political parties each sponsoring a candidate, and there is widespread party loyalty, then efforts will be expended to reduce the number of degrees of freedom from \( N \) to 2. Consequently, what a we-intention does, subsequent to its formation, is reduce the number of degrees of freedom in, for example, a two-by-two decision problem, from two degrees to one. A we-intention is a form of constraint on behavior. The notion of constraint can indeed be given a causal construal, but it need not be.

Now I don’t believe that my remarks are particularly damaging for Searle. Causal storytelling, as I’ve argued at great length on a number of occasions, is not the *raison d’être* of science, much less social science or social philosophy. I have been using causal language purely because Searle does, but I do not myself hold any brief for causal explanation, and particularly not in the social sciences. I prefer to speak of the natural history of social phenomena.

What Searle’s *Construction* has done for social science is substantial, in my view, precisely because he has worked out an attractive ontology of institutions and their dependence upon human activities in *acausal terms*, an account that consequently can be made compatible with a variety of ways of explaining social behavior. Searle has, in other words, illuminated certain *dependence relations* that were not apparent before and that are compatible with a variety of other relations among the entities he has shown as standing in these relations. Illumination of dependence relations is the object of scientific explaining, in my view. And so I view Searle’s account as an important scientific achievement. In addition, the *Construction* helps us to see what cannot be explained with his apparatus alone: namely, history. He has given us the terms in which to describe the entry and exit of institutions (acausally, of course), and consequently the instruments for finding them in a story of brute facts, but not all the tools we shall need for explaining why they come to be and pass away.

VI

**Sciences of Society**

Hobbes did not recognize the profound reality that there is more than one question corresponding to the form of the words: How did this institution or practice come into being? Although his Foole told him
so. This profound reality concerns the multiplicity of the “how.” For each kind of “how” there corresponds at least one science specializing in questions of that type. There are numerous scientific questions expressible through the self-same form of words, and this fact reflects upon the profound reality underlying the co-evolution of language and science. Hobbes gave one answer to the Foole’s question. He told the Foole about the Third Law of Nature and thereby changed the topic under discussion. And by identifying the Third Law, Hobbes drew the spotlight of attention to a question, on the nature of the constitution of social reality, to which Searle’s *Construction* centuries later offers a more promising answer. But Searle did not take notice of the omen of the Foole, and consequently took himself to be answering more than one kind of question. We would be wiser in the future to heed the parable of the Foole, and to step cautiously lest we confound questions that are best teased apart. Much better to let questions multiply, and to open out onto a landscape of scientific issues of which we have at best a limited grasp, than to shut them down and impede the growing understanding of that landscape.

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**Notes**

6. New York: The Free Press, 1995. Unless otherwise indicated, all page references will be to this work.

7. Searle says that his confidence in this irreducibility rests on an intuition to the effect that all analyses of collective aimings at common goals, in terms of individual aimings at individual goals plus common knowledge of such aims, will ultimately fail. And his reason for thinking this is that each of the individual aims that makes a contribution to achieving the common goal, when there is a common goal, is derivative, dependent for its existence on the common goal, and not the other way around. See “Collective Intentions and Actions,” in *Intentions in Communication*, P. Cohen, J. Morgan, and M. Pollack, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990): 401–15; reiterated in *The Construction of Social Reality*: 23ff. I, by contrast, argue that we ought to embrace the irreducibility thesis because the alternative is inadequate for illuminating (among other things) such everyday cases as what parent and child, separated in a crowd, need to do to be reunited (“Degrees of Freedom in the Social World,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7 (1999): 453–77.)

8. See, for example, Robert Sokolowski, “Picturing,” in *Pictures, Quotations and Distinctions* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).


