

MEETING DAN SPERBER'S CHALLENGE TO SEARLEAN SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. What follows is a brief commentary to Dan Sperber's plenary lecture at ECAP7 "The deconstruction of social unreality". Sperber's main criticism to Searle's social ontology¹ is that Searle attributes a causal role to mere Cambridge properties (in Sperber's example: Jones dies, so the rest of the world gains the Cambridge status of "Jones' survivors"). Sperber then argues that declarations do not create institutional facts causally, criticizes the Searlean theory of recognition/acceptance and put forward his thesis using the concept cognitive causal chains.

KEYWORDS. Social Ontology, Dan Sperber, John Searle, Cambridge Properties.

¹In his talk Sperber worked on the latter view of social ontology of Searle (2010).

I agree with Sperber’s new frame and I’m fascinated by his approach in which institutions are high-ordered level representation that causally characterize the distribution of lower level and by his use of cognitive causal chains as building blocks of social reality. Here I try to go along Sperber’s path and, avoiding hypostatization of Cambridge chance, I want to provide a better described taxonomy of the institutional real with the help of three parameters I will use to map and track social entities.

My three parameters will be:

1. The *degree of materiality of the entity* (i.e. is the entity a concrete object? Is it a freestanding Y term? If so, what are its empirical representations?);
2. The amount of *conceptual resources* that are needed both in the creation and the recognition of an entity (i.e. creating and understanding the status function of “boarder” or “leader” is in some sense “easier” than manipulate financial products);
3. The *amount* (and possibly the different kinds) of *deontic powers* associated to the entity (i.e. even if you consider the realm of legal institutions you will have different amounts of powers between a traffic assistant and a president; if you consider friendship as part of social ontology, you may want to claim it is different from statutory laws, etc).

Concerning the first parameter –*materiality* – and our area of application (social ontology) I think we can distinguish between concrete, freestanding and ideal objects²

For *conceptual resources* I will distinguish low, mid and high. Low is what you need to understand the objects involved in brute facts such as potatoes in the Anscombe example³ or the stone in the kicking a stone; mid is what we usually have in social facts or joint activities such as going for a walk, playing a game and maybe friendship; high is the level of complex and formalized institutions such as the Supreme Court or the IMF.⁴

The same goes for deontic powers in which I distinguish low, mid and high. Low (or zero) is what you have in brute facts; mid is for the social facts or joint activities (if you play in defense in a game you have some deontic powers associated to the fact that, in the game, you ought to avoid that the other team scores points; if you receive a mail there are deontic powers suggesting you to answer and so on); high is for complex institution in which there is a recognized authority issuing the permission and executing the sanctions in case of violation.

This allows us to plot a graph for each entity using the following table that, once filled, will tell us the three parameters of the entity under consideration:

	Category		
<i>Materiality</i>	concrete	freestanding	ideal
<i>Cognitive resources</i>	low	mid	high
<i>Deontic powers</i>	low	mid	high

Such a table offers 27 combinations under which we can classify the social world we have produced using cognitive causal chains.

²You can have a better taxonomy, I know that both material and abstract objects have lots of different ontological proposals. I think this quite easy setting allows us to discuss the specific ontological problems of social ontology (i.e. brute facts vs. institutional; freestanding Y-terms; the ontological status of legal norms and entities like promises).

³Anscombe (1958).

⁴Again, filling exactly the chart is problematic. There can be games as complex as formal legal institutions, you may want to say friendship is an institution and even that there are brute facts that are really demanding to be understood (rainbows, maybe).

I think that 27 combinations will be enough for the descriptive part of a social ontology. The next step and challenge to prescriptive ontology is to try to figure out if all the 27 combinations are meaningful: is it possible to have an ideal object with low demanding cognitive resources? Can we establish a connection between the degree of deontic powers and the degree of cognitive resources needed to grasp the entity (i.e. can we have high deontic powers with low cognitive resources employment)?

The provided framework enables us also to track the development of social entities through time: all we need to do is to collect the data and build repeated graphs for the same entity at different times. This gives dyachronicity to our system: if a line of stones is no longer a border we will see a shift from high deontic powers to low (zero) in going from a graph to another.

The next challenge, is the one of identifying the regularities and proposing different types of social entities according to the mixture of the parameters. In that case, instead of “entity” in the upper table line we will have the name of a category of social entity and, below, you will have its characteristics spelt out.

	Category		
<i>Materiality</i>	concrete	freestanding	ideal
<i>Cognitive resources</i>	low	mid	high
<i>Deontic powers</i>	low	mid	high

So we might have a category for highly material entities, deontic and another one for conceptual, almost immaterial and without powers, conceptually spontaneous, emergent entities and so on. We may try to label them, for example, the *concrete-high-high* combination might be “iconic social objects” like a crown or a wedding ring and the *ideal-low-low* one “social practices” like friendship or playing children’s game that have no formal rules.

The last and more general problem is that, to be fully articulated, my proposal presupposes that we are able to measure cognitive capacities and deontic powers. One chance could be to have a common digital framework (a program language) in which we are able to describe, using a program, all the functions and relationships between the entities and the associated deontic powers. Once this is done, we can compare different programs length corresponding to different objects and then we have a way to rank different entities that could be filled into the categories. Anyway, to fully meet Sperber’s challenge, a lot of research is still needed.

Riferimenti bibliografici

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