Group Minds and Institutional Facts

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Christian Michel is to be congratulated for setting the theme for our Madrid weekend, and for quoting as an example the statement that “The nation has voted for a change”, when later in the year the UK and then the US voted for dramatic and unexpected changes. But I shall try to keep off the politics and stick to philosophical concerns. My interest was generated rather earlier, when I read a recent book by an Israeli academic [Yuval Noah Harari] called ‘Sapiens’. It’s rather a good run-through the whole of history – but one of its main themes bothered me when I read it. This is the thesis that social organisation is the product of ‘human imagination’:

> “When the Agricultural Revolution opened opportunities for the creation of crowded cities and mighty empires, people invented stories about great gods, motherlands and joint stock companies to provide the necessary social links. While human evolution was crawling along at its usual snail’s pace, the human imagination was building astounding networks of mass cooperation”.
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> “Money…exists solely in people’s shared imagination”.
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> “The entire modern economy is not a fraud, but rather a tribute to the amazing abilities of the human imagination”.

I found these statements rather disturbing and unsatisfactory, because they seemed to imply that my employer during my whole working life was somehow ‘imaginary’, as was the stuff we spent our time allocating and arguing about as if nothing was more real or important. And this way of speaking is very common: for example, Steven Poole in the Guardian (14 November) quoted Theresa May as saying ‘”The British people, the majority of the British people, voted to leave the European Union’. The ‘people’ voted, now the supposed ‘will of the people’, must be respected. Except they, and it, are purely imaginary”.

Of course there is a reason why people are inclined to say that such entities are in some sense ‘imaginary’: above a certain level of complexity, statements about institutions are not reducible to any list of specific individual transactions – any more than a chemist could analyse a lump of metal and say whether or not it was ‘money’, simply on the basis of chemical tests. But does that make such statements ‘imaginary’, which seems to imply that they are not matters of fact but ‘fictitious’, ‘unreal’? Clearly physical facts (people’s actions in voting booths, the chemical composition of coins) are not irrelevant to institutional statements, but they seem to need some extra element to determine whether the statements are true or false.

I haven’t found traditional political philosophy much help on this question –traditionally it’s more like a branch of ethics, whereas this is a question of ontology – the nature of reality. But more recently it was the subject of two books by John Searle - ‘The Construction of Social Reality’ (1995) and ‘Making the Social World’ (2010). Searle is of course well known for his earlier work on philosophy of mind (Chinese rooms etc). He spent some formative years at Oxford in the early 50s, studying under Austin and Grice (as I did). He outlines his position in the first book, in a footnote referring to Kant: “In [Kant’s} era philosophers were obsessed by knowledge. Much later, for a brief, glorious moment, they were obsessed by language. Now this philosopher at least is obsessed by certain general structural features of human culture”. This sounds like sociology, which as he says suggests that it might already have been addressed and solved by the great founders of the social sciences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – but “it seems to me that they were not in a position to answer the questions that puzzle me, because they did not have the necessary tools”. So his approach is linguistically based, though the subject-matter is “certain general structural features” of

society. He says: “One…method of philosophy is to analyse the structure of the facts that make our statements true…I have attempted to do that with the structure of social and institutional facts”. In my view his contribution is not as well known as it deserves to be (anyway in the UK), and I hope even a rough summary will help to clarify our discussion of ‘group minds’ in such statements as “The nation has voted for a change”.

He states his aim as “to assimilate social reality to our basic ontology of physics, chemistry and biology” – to build a “bridge from physics to society”. He starts from intentionality: “With consciousness comes intentionality, the capacity of the mind to represent objects and states of affairs” in such a way that the representations “are *about* something or *directed at* something”. He treats this as part of the ‘linguistic apparatus’, deriving from earlier work on ‘speech acts’ – but interestingly, it is not confined to language, but applies also to visual phenomena: David Hockney (‘Guardian’ interview, 29 September) says “You can suggest a landscape, people and faces with extremely little. It all depends on the human ability to see a mark as a depiction” (i.e. to see a physical mark as *about*/representing something else). This ‘representation’ or ‘intentionality’ is wider than the ordinary sense of ‘intention’: the mark may be intended by an artist to represent a landscape, but it may alternatively be seen by an observer as ‘standing for’ a landscape, in an abstract pattern.

Searle moves on to ‘collective intentionality’. In his first book he treats this as a ‘biologically primitive phenomenon’, part of ‘the Background’ – ‘the set of capacities, dispositions, tendencies, practices and so on that enable the intentionality to function’. He insists that this does not entail ‘some Hegelian world spirit, a collective consciousness’; in cases of collective intentionality, “the collective intentionality that exists in each individual has the form ‘We intend’”. He calls such cases ‘social facts’ – a different category from physical facts. In his second book he says that ‘collective intentionality’ “has become something of a cottage industry in analytic philosophy”, aiming to reduce ‘We intend’ statements to a set of ‘I intend’ statements plus mutual beliefs about each others’ intentions. But characteristically he dismisses those attempts as unsatisfactory and unnecessary: “When I talk about this form of collective intentionality, I am talking about the capacity of humans and other animals to actually *cooperate* in their activities. Cooperation *implies* the existence of common knowledge or common belief, but the common knowledge or belief, together with individual intentions to achieve a common goal, is not by itself sufficient for cooperation”.

The next step in his argument is to point out that many things are defined, not by their physical structure and history, but by their functions. A screwdriver is intended and used to drive screws, whatever material it is made of. Philosophers have been obsessed by ‘natural kinds’, but many things in ordinary life belong to ‘unnatural kinds’ – man-made objects defined at least partly by their functions, what they are intended to do. Like these objects, institutions are artefacts, defined in terms of their functions rather than their physical instantiation.

Then Searle’s main point is that things can be given a status which endows them with a function. He puts this in terms of a ‘status-function declaration’:

> ‘X is to count as Y in context C’.

This ‘constitutive rule’ creates the ‘institutional fact’ that X *is* Y in C, by imposing on ‘X’ a new status ‘Y’ which carries with it a function. The most obvious example is money:

> ‘’This piece of paper is to count as money (in a context where it is legal tender)’.

These ‘status-function declarations’ are constituted by rules (conventions, practices, procedures) defining features which are necessary to perform the extra status-function Y. The Y term imposes a

new status on X, carrying with it a function, and this function can't be performed just in virtue of the physical features embodied in the X term. The function requires the status in order for it to be performed, and the status requires collective intentionality, including a continued recognition of the status with its corresponding function.

The 'X' term itself can be a complex status-function. But the hierarchy of status-functions 'has to reach a rock bottom' of brute facts. "What we think of as social *objects*, such as governments, money and universities, are in fact just placeholders for patterns of activities….our interest is not in the object but in the processes and events where the functions are manifested". Institutional facts "exist only within institutions", and "an institution is a system of constitutive rules", or 'standing status-function declarations', which "creates the possibility of institutional facts". Such facts are 'ontologically subjective' (only true if people believe them) but 'epistemologically objective' (it is an objective, person-independent fact that people believe them). And they have 'deontic powers' – they "create institutional forms of powers, obligations, duties etc [which] create reasons for action which are independent of what [people are] inclined to do".

Conferring these status-functions can be anything from a formal 'performative' declaration – 'Obama is hereby declared President' – to tacitly accepted conventions – Boris Johnson said that for Parliament to ignore the Brexit referendum would be 'not cricket', and Vince Cable suggested, more soberly, that it would be 'seriously disrespectful' to the British people.

There is nothing mysterious about social conventions in this general form. They are easily understood, widely accepted and fully effective in the functions they perform. Indeed, as Searle points out, they are the foundation of language itself. The definition of any word can be expressed in this form:

> 'The word 'cat' is to count as standing for cats, in an English-language context'.

Unpacked in more detail, this can be spelled out:

> ''The physical word 'cat' (a spoken or written 'speech act') is to count as having the status of a symbol with the function of representing things with the physical characteristics of cats, in the context of the English language'.

The fact that this business of assigning functions is extremely familiar and deeply rooted in human nature is suggested, for example, in children's play:

> 'This packing-case is to count as a spaceship in the context of our game'.

But this example shows the fallacy in saying that institutions like money are 'imaginary'. The children are fully aware that their 'spaceship' is actually a packing case, and only very distantly ('functionally') related in their imaginations to real physical spaceships – whereas money is defined by its status-function, and is what it is, an institutional fact.

Anyway I have now reached the other side of Searle's 'bridge' from brute physical facts to institutional facts. Money can explain human actions, and is of course the basis for a whole socio-economic aspect of human behaviour. But to understand the concept of 'money' requires not simply a description of human actions but an understanding of the legal and conventional framework which motivates the behaviour. This legal and conventional framework is dependent on human agreement and acceptance – on collective intentionality. And yet despite all this complexity money is just as 'real', statements about money are just as 'true', as statements about the physical coins in your pocket.

Some questions for discussion:

1. Are Searle's 'institutional facts' with 'deontic powers' consistent with Hume's distinction between facts and values, and how can they be reconciled?

2. If institutions "create reasons for action which are independent of what people are inclined to do", how can these reasons (the 'social contract') be given weight in times of rampant individualism?

3. Similarly, in terms of 'virtue ethics', how can the virtues of loyalty to an institution and respect for authority be promoted?

4. In terms of evolutionary psychology, given that there is a 'species-beneficial' inclination towards altruism as against individualism, how can it be extended from family, friends and known individuals in 'the tribe' to abstract institutions like democratic government and the rule of law?

5. In terms of individual psychology, is there, in some situations, an instinct to follow 'crowd psychology' which overrides and conflicts with individual self-interest? – and is this different from the satisfaction, in some situations (rowing crew, choir) of subordinating individual performance achievement to 'collective intentionality'?

References:

Yuval Noah Harari, "Sapiens" (Harvill Secker 2014)

John Searle, "The Construction of Social Reality" (Simon and Schuster 1995)

"Making the Social World" (OUP 2010)