

SOCIAL ENTITIES

Amie L. Thomasson

The social sciences study social entities, including social facts (e.g. the fact that there is a crisis in the housing market, or that Hong Kong was returned to Chinese rule), social actions (e.g. the dissolution of parliament, the invasion of Poland), and social objects (e.g. the Magna Carta, Microsoft). But social entities are not merely the concern of social scientists – they are also the focus of most of our daily concerns, as we consider which courses to enroll in, worry about the status of our bank accounts, apply for new drivers' licenses, rent apartments, and organize dinner parties.

Social entities seem to differ from merely natural objects like sticks and stones in an important respect, however: they are, in some sense, human constructions and would not exist without human habits, practices, beliefs, and/or agreements. Thus, as Finn Collin puts it, “It is a truism that the reality in which the human species lives is of human-kind's own making ... Human beings make their own world” (1997: 1).

The fact that social entities depend on human beliefs and intentions for their existence raises metaphysical questions about them that do not arise for mere natural objects. If we in some sense just make these things up, should we consider them to be genuine parts of our world at all – or should we consider them just as illusory as the creatures in the stories we make up? As John Searle puts it, we have a “sense that there is an element of magic, a conjuring trick, a sleight of hand in the creation of institutional facts out of brute facts,” so that “In our toughest metaphysical moods we want to ask ... are these bits of paper really *money*? ... Is making certain noises in a ceremony really *getting married*? ... Surely when you get down to brass tacks, these are not real facts” (1995: 45).

Yet despite their apparent mind-dependence, social entities exhibit certain hallmarks of real entities: first, there is much about them that we apparently do not know, but require serious investigations – including those of tax collectors, courts of law, and the social sciences – to discover. And such discoveries at least purport to present objective knowledge, just as those of the natural sciences do. Second, although social entities are in some sense made up by us, we typically encounter them as being independent of our will, even coercive of us. I cannot, simply by willing alone, make it the case that I am not in debt, or that George Bush is not president. It is predominantly this independence from our will that led Emile Durkheim to declare that we must study social phenomena “objectively as external things,” as “the most important

characteristic of a ‘thing’ is the impossibility of its modification by a simple effort of the will” (1994 [1938]: 438–9).

Thus three central puzzles arise regarding social entities: (1) How can human beliefs and intentions create new facts, events and objects? As Berger and Luckman put it, “How is it possible that human activity should produce a world of things?” (1966: 18). (2) How can these mind-dependent social entities ever be unknown, potential objects of objective knowledge and discovery? (3) Given their mind-dependence, how can social objects be independent of our will, even coercive of us?

I address these puzzles in turn below. I begin in the first section by discussing the ways in which human intentionality may create social reality. I then go on in the second and third sections to suggest how understanding the different ways social reality is created enables us to unravel the latter two puzzles, explaining how such social entities may be open to objective discoveries and independent of our will.

The creation of social entities

What are social entities? I began by saying that they are the entities studied by the social sciences, though this may hardly be considered a definition. Social *facts* have been more often considered than social entities more broadly considered, and attempts to define “social fact” have generally been aimed at distinguishing them, on the one hand, from mere natural entities, and, on the other, from mere private, personal, or psychological entities. As we have already noted above, social entities differ from natural entities insofar as the former, but not the latter, would not exist without human habits, beliefs, and/or agreements. (Of course some anti-realists hold that all objects are in some sense mind-dependent – but even they must acknowledge a difference between that and the dependence of the many aspects of the social world created by the practices or agreements of the people who participate in it. For further discussion, see Devitt [1991: 246–9]).

But this does not yet distinguish social entities from individual psychological states and their products (such as personal wishes, hallucinations, or actions). To make this distinction, the distinctively *social* is typically identified with the *collective* (Collin 1997: 5), and so, e.g., Searle defines “social fact” as “any fact involving collective intentionality” (1995: 26). More broadly, we can think of social entities as entities that depend on collective intentionality. The dependence here is not just causal – it’s not just that social entities are causally brought into existence by collective intentions (as Mount Trashmore was created by city workers jointly covering over an old landfill). Instead, the dependence of social entities on collective intentionality is a metaphysical or conceptual matter: given the very idea of money, or a school, or real estate, it clearly doesn’t make any sense to think that such things could exist without collective human (or other intelligent) intentions. By contrast, it does make sense to think that a mountain could exist without any collective human intentions, so Mount Trashmore is not a social entity, even though it happens to have been brought into existence by teams of humans working together to serve a common goal.

But what, exactly, is collective intentionality? “Intentionality” is a feature of mental states that are *of* or *about* something, and so not only intentions (in the sense of intending

to do something), but also beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and the like are mental states with intentionality. We often attribute intentional mental states to social groups, e.g. when we say that the Calvinists believe in predestination, the Smiths want a larger home, or the Bears hope to win on Sunday. But there has been little agreement about what exactly it takes for beliefs, desires, etc., to count as *collective*. Searle (1995: 26) takes collective intentionality to be a certain “we” form of intentionality, consisting in each individual having thoughts of the form (e.g.) “we intend” (rather than “I intend”). Others (e.g. Bratman 1993) have taken collective intentions to involve individual beliefs and intentions that are interrelated in specified ways (involving certain intentions about the others’ intentions in conditions of common knowledge). By contrast, Margaret Gilbert proposes understanding collective intentions not as intentions of individuals at all, but rather as the intentions of plural subjects formed when individuals undertake a certain kind of joint commitment (Gilbert 1989). Others still (Tuomela 2003: 154) have suggested distinguishing a range of different kinds of collective intentionality relevant to the existence of different parts of social reality. Here I will leave to one side debates about how to understand collective intentionality.

If social entities are any entities that depend on collective intentionality then there are as many kinds of social entity as there are ways of depending on collective intentionality. While making no claim to being exhaustive, below I will provide an overview of some importantly different categories into which social entities may fall.

Provided we accept that everything depends on itself, the most basic social entities are collective intentional states themselves and facts about what is collectively believed, desired, accepted, or valued in a given social group. Collective intentions may also form the basis for collective actions – given the right kind of collective intentions, the movements of a number of individual people may amount to performing a collective action, e.g., building a house.

Given the need for stability and the importance of being able to predict each others’ actions and coordinate our behaviors, such collective actions tend to fall into repeated patterns – via what Berger and Luckmann (1966: 53) call “habitualization.” Where activities are habitualized, we can develop collective conceptions of certain “types” of actions and of actor, simplifying social interaction by leading to mutual expectations about forms of behavior (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 54). When these expectations become normative, having implications for how participants *ought to* behave, we reach the level of social reality Raimo Tuomela (2003: 152) has called “social practices,” e.g. the Midsummer Feast, the Saturday lesson, and corresponding social roles, e.g. the Carver at the feast, the teacher of the lesson.

But social entities are not limited to our collective intentions and practices themselves; as Searle has pointed out, a far greater range of social entities may be constructed by using collective intentions and actions to impose new social features on “brute” physical objects. On Searle’s account mere *social facts* may be created when we assign new functions to old material entities, e.g. assigning this log the function of serving as our bench. The more interesting cases, however, are those of *institutional facts*, which arise when we collectively impose upon some entity a new function which (unlike being a bench) it could not perform solely in virtue of its physical features – as,

for example when we impose upon a river the function of serving as the boundary of our territory (1995: 38–9). These are the so-called “status functions” that, according to Searle, are the hallmarks of institutional reality. Status functions may be iterated – e.g. we may assign this person the status of being citizen, and then assign this citizen the status function of being president. But all status functions, on Searle’s account, ultimately confer new deontic powers – enablements and requirements – on individuals (e.g. the president is given the power to sign legislation into law).

On Searle’s account, we impose status functions on objects by collectively accepting constitutive rules. Whereas “regulative” rules (such as “drive on the right side of the road”) merely regulate preexisting activities, constitutive rules are rules where the relevant activity is in part “constituted” by following those rules – e.g. you must be following a certain set of rules to be playing chess, to be filing a lawsuit, or to be earning credits towards a university degree at all. Searle describes the basic form of constitutive rules as “X counts as Y (in context C).” The “X” term may stand for an individual (token) item, as, e.g., we may accept that this river counts as the boundary between our nations, or it may stand for any item of a certain type as, e.g. we accept that any pieces of paper of this pattern issued by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving count as twenty-dollar bills, and thereby assign any and all pieces of paper that meet those conditions the status function of serving as money – a function their mere physical nature alone does not enable them to fulfill (1995: 44–6).

As I have argued elsewhere (2003a), we should actually consider these as two different sorts of rule for creating institutional reality: cases of the first type involve adopting a *singular* rule, of the following form (where “S” names some social feature): of a particular (preexisting) object *a*, we (collectively) accept (*Sa*), e.g. of this river, we accept that it counts as the boundary of our territory. Cases of the second type involve adopting a *universal* rule: that, for any *x*, we accept that if *x* meets certain conditions *C*, then *Sx*. In either case, the object only continues to serve this new function as long as we continue to accept the corresponding constitutive rules, so, e.g., pieces of paper meeting conditions *C* continue to count as money only as long as we continue to accept the relevant constitutive rule. Such constitutive rules enable us to endow preexisting objects with new social features – either one at a time (using singular rules), or wholesale (using universal rules). In fact, Searle argues, no new objects are involved in institutional reality at all; “rather, a new status with an accompanying function has been assigned to an old object” (1995: 57).

But although Searle’s story explains how preexisting entities like rivers and pieces of paper may acquire new status functions, it can’t explain how new social entities such as laws, companies, and religions may be constructed. For there is no constitutive rule that assigns to some preexisting physical object or objects the function of serving as an antismoking law, as Microsoft, or as the Anglican Church. These things cannot be understood simply as preexisting physical objects with new status functions, since they are not physical entities at all – indeed we might call them “abstract” social objects.

To account for the creation of abstract social objects, I have argued (2003a), we must allow that constitutive rules may take a third form: *existential* rules involve collectively accepting that, if certain conditions obtain, then *there is some (new) entity x* such that

Sx. These constitutive rules, unlike those of the first two forms, are existence-introducing, since they allow that the obtaining of certain conditions counts as sufficient for the existence of a new social entity. Thus, for example, we accept that if congress votes with a majority in favor of a bill and the president signs it, then a new law is created. That law, however, is not identical with any piece of paper the president signs (it may continue to exist even if that paper is destroyed), nor with any member of congress or action of any such member. Similarly, constitutive rules ensure that if the relevant paperwork is filed, a new company may be created which is not identical to its founder, its board of directors, or any of the paperwork used in setting it up. Broadening the range of constitutive rules in this way enables us to explain how collective intentions may create, not only new social facts (involving old material objects), but also new social objects such as laws, corporations, etc.

All of these entities are in some sense intentionally created – either individually (via a singular rule) or by acceptance of universal or existential rules that lay out conditions for what it takes for objects to have that social feature, or what it takes for such a social object to be created. Call these “constructed social entities.” Constructed social entities exhibit what Searle calls “self-referentiality” (1995: 32): for there to be entities of the relevant social kind, there must be collective intentional states *about* that social kind – either designating certain entities as belonging to that kind, or laying out principles for there being something of the kind.

But it is important to note that there are a great many social entities that are not intentionally created – even though they depend on collective intentionality. Basic social entities such as collective intentions themselves (e.g. a collective fear of being attacked by a lion) are not constructed in the above sense (Tuomela 2003: 161). Moreover, such social entities as racism, economic recessions, class systems, and gender-biased power structures are typically not intentionally created (either directly or indirectly) by accepting constitutive rules about entities of that kind – indeed they may exist even if they are not *intentionally* created at all, making it more natural to speak of them as *generated* rather than *created* or *constructed* (Thomasson 2003a).

Such unintended social entities emerge as the byproducts of more basic social and institutional facts, especially when considered on a large scale (or as Andersson puts it, at the “macro level” [2007: 113]). So, for example, all particular acts of hiring, firing, establishing wages and granting promotions, involve institutional facts that must be constructed, according to constitutive rules regarding what counts as a hiring, etc. But these may fall into patterns that constitute a case of a gender-biased system, without such a system being intentionally created by anyone. In such cases we clearly have entities that, at some level, depend on collective intentionality (since the individual acts of hiring, firing, etc., each depend on collective acceptance of constitutive rules involving those concepts), but they do not depend on collective intentions *about* gender bias at all (Thomasson 2003a). As a result, unlike intentionally constructed entities, they do not exhibit self-referentiality and may come into being without the intentions or knowledge of members of that society. (Tuomela [2003: 129] draws a similar distinction between “primary constructively social” entities and other social entities not directly constructed).

Social entities as objects of knowledge

Armed with the above understanding of some of the ways social entities may come into being, we can now see at least four ways in which the social entities may be *discoverable*, despite the fact that they all ultimately depend on collective intentionality.

First, there is always room for discovery of facts about societies *other than our own*, for although social entities depend on collective intentionality, the relevant intentional states of course needn't be *universally* held. So although what counts as money, or as sacred, or as legally required, may depend on what participants *regard as* money, as sacred, or as illegal in their society, these facts nonetheless require substantive discovery by outsiders – leaving plenty of room for the discoveries of historians, cultural anthropologists, archeologists, and the like.

The trickier part is understanding how we may potentially make discoveries about *our own* society – especially those parts of it that we intentionally *construct*. We do have certain kinds of privileged knowledge about our own social constructions (see my 2001, 2003b). For example, where a social fact (e.g. that this river is our boundary) is created using a singular rule, then it can't be unknown, since it must be collectively accepted to exist at all. More generally, given the self-referentiality discussed above, constructed social entities cannot exist unless certain facts about entities of that type are collectively accepted, e.g. there cannot be money without either directly accepting certain objects as money, or accepting universal or existential rules about what counts as (there being) money.

Nonetheless, where social entities are constructed by accepting universal or existential rules (rather than singular rules), individual (token) entities of that type can still exist unknown – yielding a second way in which social facts may be available for discovery. For although we have to collectively accept general rules about the conditions under which there are entities of that kind, it's possible that no one knows that those conditions are met. So, for example, members of a society may collectively accept that if anyone pulls the sword out of the stone, that person counts as their king – and yet it may remain unknown to them that a foreigner has passed by and pulled the sword out, and thus unknown that they have a (rightful) king (see Searle 1995: 32).

A third, more interesting, opportunity for discoveries about the social entities we construct concerns what we might call “higher-order” facts about social reality, that is, not first-order social facts themselves, but facts about how those very social facts came into existence, and what continues to give them their legitimacy. On the above understanding, social facts come into existence through certain forms of collective agreement, and someone counts as king, for example, only if he is collectively accepted as king, or certain rules are collectively accepted that entail that he is king. But while collective acceptance is fundamental to the existence of such institutional facts, that doesn't mean that there must be collective awareness that *that's all there is* to establishing and maintaining these institutions (Searle 1995: 21–2, 47). On the contrary, as Berger and Luckmann (1966: 92ff.) point out, our most important social institutions typically undergo a process of *legitimation* – devising (sometimes false or mythical) justifications for the existence of social institutions and for their being the way that they are, in order

to ensure conformity. Thus, e.g. the legitimation may involve saying that this man is king *because* he was appointed by God, covering over the fact that he is actually only king because of collective acceptance of him as king. Similarly, marriages exist if there are certain collectively accepted procedures that lay out what counts as a marriage, and those procedures are sometimes followed. But legitimations may cover this over by treating marriage as a union blessed by God, as the only acceptable or most effective means of rearing children, etc. This opens room for what is often called “critique” in social sciences, where that involves showing up these legitimating stories and uncovering the real basis for various social institutions, often by demonstrating their actual history and showing what functions they really serve in society.

The fourth and perhaps richest area for potential discoveries is regarding those social entities that are generated as byproducts rather than being constructed. So although money, presidents, and drivers’ licenses may not be able to exist without people accepting certain things (or sorts of thing) *as* money, presidents, or drivers’ licenses, the same is not true for economic cycles, patterns of human settlement, or gender-based discrimination in the workplace. These social entities may exist without anyone having any thoughts at all about economic cycles, settlement patterns, or gender discrimination – indeed the very concepts needed to describe such things as recessions, racism, and gender discrimination may not be possessed by societies in which they are commonplace (see my 2003a). Nonetheless, they still depend, at bottom, on individual social facts (about transactions, habitation, employment) that exist only given collective acceptance (either of those facts or of constitutive rules that, combined with the basic facts, generate them).

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that despite the fact that social entities depend on collective intentionality, our discoveries about them may nonetheless be *objective* knowledge. Searle makes this point by distinguishing two senses of “objective.” In the *epistemic* sense, we may speak of *judgments* as objective or subjective – they are objective if there are “facts in the world that make them true or false [which] are independent of anybody’s attitudes or feelings about them” (1995: 8). In the *ontological* sense, we may speak of entities being objective if their “mode of existence is independent of any perceiver or any mental state” (1995: 8). Social features of the world are ontologically subjective, since their existence always at some level depends on collective intentionality. But judgments about the social world – e.g. about the state of the economy, or the status of Sam’s drivers’ license – may nonetheless be epistemically objective, since their truth or falsehood is not just a matter of peoples’ attitudes or feelings about them. Sam may refuse to believe that his drivers’ license has been suspended, but that does not make the problem go away, and politicians may refuse to accept that we are in a recession without that having the least impact on the fact itself. This is possible quite simply because the collective intentions on which these facts depend are not our own attitudes or feelings about those very facts. The facts about the economy, for example, depend on our collective acceptance of certain rules regarding what counts as money, what counts as buying and selling stock, etc. – but they do not depend upon our collective beliefs *about the state of the economy* (we may all be wrong in thinking that the economy is doing just fine – or we may even fail

to have any general opinions about the economy at all, each just focusing on our own financial transactions).

Social entities as independent of the will

Social facts, as Durkheim observed, have “coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves” on us, independent of our will (1994 [1938]: 433), and it was this which, on his view, marked them out as “thing-like” entities distinct from mere products of our own imagination or fantasy. There are a number of different senses in which social entities may be said to be “coercive” of us. The first, weakest, sense is that they exist independently of our individual wills, and (in Durkheim’s phrase) can’t be modified “by a simple effort of the will” (1994 [1938]: 439). In stronger senses, social entities may be said to be coercive of us insofar as they may shape what it is that we will or desire (e.g. encouraging girls to desire motherhood over career success), or provide resistance against or punishment for pursuing our desires. The impact on our wills isn’t always negative: social entities also *enable* us to form certain intentions or desires we would not otherwise have had, such as the desire to qualify for the Olympics, or to receive a Ph.D., but this again suggests their *independence* from our wills.

While these are all interesting and important issues for the philosophy of society, given space constraints here I will focus simply on the weakest sense, since it is the fact that social facts, like natural facts (e.g. that water freezes at 0 degrees Celsius) cannot be modified by a simple effort of the will that (according to Durkheim 1994 [1938]) gives them their “thing-like” status.

Once we see that social entities depend on *collective* intentionality, it is easy to see why they typically cannot be modified by any *individual’s* effort of the will. For whatever account of collective intentionality we adopt, it is clear that the *collective* intentions on which our social practices, institutions, and the like depend may persist in the absence of any individual’s intentional states. Yet it also seems that social entities often can’t be modified by a simple collective “effort of the will.” A society may come to collectively lament the high proportion of its population in jail or the wretched state of the economy, without the public will alone being able to make the offending facts go away. (This of course is not to deny that certain forms of collective action could help change these facts.)

Here again a variety of avenues for explanation are available, according to the differences in social entities involved. Social facts may not be altered by a simple collective effort of the will if they are facts that are constructed by accepting universal or existential constitutive rules – instead, either the rules themselves must be changed, or the conditions that, when combined with the rules, yield the social facts, must be changed. So if there is a constitutive rule to the effect that those convicted of three crimes count as sentenced to life in prison, a simple effort of the collective will cannot change the prison population – instead, either the relevant constitutive rule must be changed, or the underlying conditions (about how many people are multiple offenders) must be changed.

It is even more difficult to willfully alter social facts that are generated as byproducts of constructed social entities. Thus, e.g., the state of the economy is a byproduct of a

great multitude of intentionally conducted transactions – but while any of those transactions might be modified by willful efforts of the parties involved, the overall state of the economy is not responsive to individual or collective desires *about it* at all, since it is independent of these. It can, at best, be modified very indirectly, by our undertaking many other individual transactions (e.g. consumers spending, the Federal Reserve lowering interest rates) that we hope will help.

The social world is puzzling since it seems to be at once a human creation, and something that may be unknown to us, and even coercive of us. The way to unravel these puzzles, as we have seen, lies in understanding the different ways in which social entities may be created, and the different senses in which they may depend on human intentionality. A proper ontology of the social world may thus help us see how, despite their dependence on human intentionality, social objects may show up to us as genuine, discoverable, and even recalcitrant parts of our world.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Åsa Andersson and Andrew McGonigal for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

References

-
- Andersson, Åsa (2007) “Power and Social Ontology,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Lund, Sweden.
 Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas (1966) *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Anchor-Doubleday.
 Bratman, Michael (1993) “Shared Intention,” *Ethics* 104: 97–113.
 Collin, Finn (1997) *Social Reality*, London: Routledge.
 Devitt, Michael (1991) *Realism and Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell.
 Durkheim, Emile (1994 [1938]) “Social Facts,” reprinted in Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre (eds), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 433–40; excerpted from *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller; edited by George E. G. Catlin, New York: The Free Press, 1938.
 Gilbert, Margaret (1989) *On Social Facts*, New York: Routledge.
 Searle, John (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: The Free Press.
 Thomasson, Amie L. (2001) “Geographic Objects and the Science of Geography,” *Topoi* 20, no. 2: 149–59.
 — (2003a) “Foundations for a Social Ontology,” *Protosociology* 18–19: 269–90.
 — (2003b) “Realism and Human Kinds,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 67, no. 3 (November): 580–609.
 Tuomela, Raimo (2003) “Collective Acceptance, Social Institutions, and Social Reality,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 62, no. 1: 123–65.

Further reading

For discussion of why mind-dependent social entities should nonetheless be considered “real” parts of our world, see my “Geographic Objects and the Science of Geography,” *Topoi* 20, no. 2 (2001): 149–59; and “Foundations for a Social Ontology,” *Protosociology* 18–19 (2003): 269–90. For a clear overview of the debates about collective intentionality, see Deborah Tollefsen, “Collective Intentionality,” in James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (eds), *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2004) (available: <http://www.iep.utm>).

AMIE L. THOMASSON

edu/c/coll-int.htm). For an account of deontic social powers (imposing enablements and requirements), see John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 100ff. For arguments that we must broaden our understanding of social powers beyond mere deontic powers, see Åsa Andersson, "Power and Social Ontology" (Ph.D. dissertation) (University of Lund, Sweden, 2007), chapter 5.