

This week we deepened our study of social norms with an examination of various attempts to systematize and formalize the process of norm formation and diffusion. We saw multiple authors grappling with a common problem – given that the social world is a subjective human construct, how are we to understand the seemingly objective status that social norms are accorded in moral reasoning?

I think the most convincing account was given by the philosopher John Searle in his book *Making the Social World*. Searle proposes that society has a fundamentally logical structure susceptible to analysis, and argues that humans are uniquely able to impose functions on objects and people through collective acceptance and recognition. Status functions are said to exist in virtue of collective intentionality, and they carry deontic powers to confer rights, duties, obligations and so on. These deontic powers give us reasons for action that are independent of our inclinations and desires, in the same way that the rules of a game enable the possibility of its play. Searle calls these status functions brought together by constitutive rules “the glue that holds human civilization together.”

Searle distinguishes between brute (objective) facts and institutional facts, which are said to be objective but only by virtue of (subjective) human agreement or acceptance. The puzzle Searle is concerned with is how institutional facts can be at once objective and subjective. Institutions are systems of constitutive rules, and such a system gives rise to institutional facts, like the identity of the current President of the United States. He sees these institutional facts as a special class of declarations, which combine “world-to-word” and “word-to-world” directions of fit to change reality to match the propositional content of speech.¹ Searle thinks that human civilization is enabled and brought into being by these declarations and speech acts of similar logical form. Such “status function declarations” use semantics to “create a reality that goes beyond semantics,” bootstrapping themselves into existence as simultaneously objective and subjective phenomena. Searle attempts to resolve the paradox by distinguishing between ontological and epistemic objectivity (and subjectivity), but this treatment is brief and raises additional questions.

It is clear how these ideas might apply to our study of social norms. The power of human speech acts to shape objective reality is most clearly expressed through the existence of human-created norms, based on subjective intentionality but with the strength

¹ Austin’s “performative utterances” are a subset of this class of declarations.

of objective fact. The latent potential is evident – social engineering of institutional facts can shape individual behavior in prosocial, community enhancing ways – but its stultifying perils are just as clear.

The philosopher Dan Little criticizes Searle’s assertion that human civilization depends on declarative speech acts as overbroad and dogmatic. He points out that some of the behaviors that Searle calls uniquely human are engaged in by great apes, and he cites David Lewis to argue that conventions can emerge informally and non-linguistically. Little prefers Lewis’ inversion of Searle’s causality, arguing that “language presupposes conventions rather than being a necessary condition to the possibility of a convention.” This means that social activity is not reducible to language, and on Little’s terms Searle is merely “redefining rather than explaining”. While I agree that Searle’s civilizational claims are overbroad, I think he could easily reformulate them to meet these objections: he would simply need to argue that only abstract, propositional conventions (the President of the United States) require language for their fulfillment, and he could still then freely argue that these abstract propositional conventions are the *sine qua non* of civilization.

In *The Epidemiology of Beliefs*, Dan Sperber sees the issue from a different perspective. He asks how beliefs become culturally represented. He models representation as a three-place predicate (“something represents something *for someone*”), and distinguishes between public and mental representations. He argues that such representations have genuine material content, but that aggregations of them into abstractions such as “the culture of a community” are purely notional. As material objects, individual representations can interact in causal relationships, and Sperber hypothesizes that these interactions explain cultural phenomena.

He argues that representations spread in an epidemiological manner, explaining both transmission and evolution of what he calls “families” of concrete representations. Replication, on his view, is a rare result of cultural transmission – indeed, “a process of communication is basically one of transformation...Only those representations which are repeatedly communicated *and* minimally transformed in the process will end up belonging to the culture.” Both psychological factors (background knowledge, motivation, ease of memorization) and ecological factors (applicability, institutions, external memory) play a role in this transmission.

Sperber distinguishes between intuitive (first-order) beliefs limited to basic concepts and reflective (second-order) beliefs with complex content, which are based on and embedded in intuitive beliefs, frequently on the basis of authority. He asserts that intuitive beliefs are relatively stable across cultures while reflective beliefs vary widely, and explains this divergence on the basis of the truth character of half-understood reflective beliefs. “Because they are only half-understood and therefore open to reinterpretation, their consistency or inconsistency with other beliefs, intuitive or reflective, is never self-evident, and does not provide a robust criterion for acceptance or rejection.” Since reflective beliefs are rationally held in virtue of their source (rather than their content), there is potential for wide variation across cultures. Intuitive beliefs are anchored by perceptual experience, while reflective beliefs are purely the product of communication.

In examining these theories, one gets the impression that all the authors are somehow measuring a common substrate. For instance, Sperber’s intuitive and reflective beliefs map on (in some sense) to Searle’s brute and institutional facts. This is encouraging, as it supports Searle’s conjecture that society has a fundamentally logical structure susceptible to analysis. I don’t think very much hangs on Little’s inversion of Searle’s causality. Social norms are clearly broader than declarative speech acts, but we are still left with the paradox of their apparent permanence and immutability, despite their social origins.

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