

Reciprocal illumination: epistemological necessity or ontological destiny? Some preliminary remarks^{♦1}

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Abstract: This paper explores two different but intimately linked concepts. First, there is "reciprocal illumination," or the relation of interdependence of the object of knowledge and its subject. Second is the "irreversibility" which characterizes the process of applying constitutive rules, which causes institutional facts to become facts, and to be even stricter and more epistemologically constant than brute facts.

In our attempt to understand the world we take for granted that reality is something *entirely independent* from us who acquire the knowledge of what there is. This seems to be the way it should be. A *theory* is a kind of reflection of some independent reality which precedes any theory, and the best theory is the one which best fits the data coming from reality. We call the data *facts*. But what are these facts?

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In this short paper I would like to offer a few modest remarks regarding two separate issues, with the hope they will be provocative enough to be worthy of discussion. One is what I will call “reciprocal illumination,” and deals with fallibility as our epistemological condition in the world. The other is a feature of institutional facts which makes them able to avoid the vagueness that is contained in brute facts (as they change and partly depend on the sharpness and precision of our perceptions, which can never be absolutely certain); I will designate this as “irreversibility,” as the turning point in applying constitutive rules in the process of producing these as “facts”.

Firstly, two basic preliminaries. When we say “facts,” we mean the contents of sentences that are answers to questions of the type “What is the case?”; i.e. sentences that state that something *is* the case. At some point, however, we should see that there are two kinds of facts: *brute* facts (namely all things and events in the natural world, the existence of which really is independent of us or our believing that they exist – they exist entirely independently of anything we say or can say) and *institutional* facts (containing facts that exist only because we *believe* they exist – as John Searle described in his work in a much more complex and precise way).²

Secondly, institutional facts are different from *values*, which are *not* facts in this sense – values are the contents of sentences that are answers to questions of the type “What do we want to be the case?” and such sentences do not state anything about existence in the empirical sense. Values are thus created by the act of will to posit something as a goal that we are interested in (something that no one is interested in has no value). The important difference between values and institutional facts is that values do not “exist” in the sense in which institutional facts do—namely, they are not true or false answers to the question “What is the case?” (there is no “being the case” when it comes to values).

I will not go further into details regarding this, presuming it is well known from Searle’s many works on the topic. What I intend to explore are some minor issues

² We may notice that I do not consider Maurizio Ferraris’ “ideal” objects as fit to constitute “facts” (2010), which might be only a matter of approach, or terminology (do mathematical statements contain any “facts?”).

regarding two things – one being how the reciprocal illumination between a theory and the facts that are the object of that theory function in the realm of institutional facts, and second being some details of the function of irreversibility, which is crucial for institutional facts.

I. The reciprocal illumination

In the approach taken here to what there is out there in reality, we may presume a catalogue of particular things that exist in the world (Ferraris 2012: 6.3), saying what there is, where and when it is, how ordered it is, and how to distinguish it from the rest of the world, from anything else there. But to know all this we have to start with a particular standpoint, by defining a particular “approach” and what can be “seen” from this standpoint, which may be different from what can be seen from some other point. The presupposition, or presumption, here is that whatever there is, it is entirely independent from where we stand and will be always the same (namely, independent from that particular standpoint). The sameness of what there *is* remains untouched by differences in our approach, those differences being entirely on us: we can apprehend only a part or an aspect of the reality we are approaching, and we are the side which should eventually accommodate the other, if we are not satisfied with the result. We can designate this as the ontological point of view: the reality is out there, regardless of what we know or believe. And certainly there is a sense in which *all* facts are independent in this way. Even in the case of institutional facts, which exist only because we believe they do (having their existence absolutely dependent on such belief), we have this same independence (this is what Ferraris (2012: 6.3) thinks by claiming that «Social objects depend on subjects, but are not subjective»).

However, there are two limits here. Firstly, there is a limit determined by the restrictive nature of any particular standpoint, because of which we probably never will be able to grasp the whole of everything there is; secondly, there is a limit which comes from the nature of the relation between the subject of knowledge and the object of

knowledge, namely, mutual dependence as a kind of reciprocity. This is the issue of reciprocal illumination. Despite the fact that we take knowledge as a kind of reflection of something outside us which exists independently, what we see is also in part determined by the instrument of seeing or knowing. It is determined by the “kind” of the “light” we direct towards objects of our knowledge, as it were. If we cast red light on something, it will appear as red; if we cast a light of different color it will look differently. If we substitute “the light” with “a theory,” we will have the following situation: if we change the theory, the facts may change as well. In principle, there is nothing necessarily problematic here: if we change the theory, the consequence will be that we will pick a different set of facts, and this act of replacement of one set of facts with another one does not mean that the facts have changed. It means only that some facts have been replaced with some other facts. This is a straightforward explanation of the change at hand. The change has been produced by the change of what has been considered to be relevant, which means that the criteria of relevance have been changed—for example, that we increased the level of required plausibility, or that we took another focus.

The matter is more complex than this. It is not only because we change the criteria of relevance and plausibility in determining what there is (neglecting what we consider as irrelevant as if being non-existent) but also because we have to accommodate what has been *already accepted* and recognized as relevant, and thus considered real. This means that we might be ready to accept a theory or an explanation of what there is even if it does not fit all the data. If a theory is *internally* plausible, and fits in with prevailing or accepted beliefs, we may disregard the data that contradict this picture. And, in a way, it happens all the time. My question is: does it mean that this is just a coincidence, something which should be taken as a sign of our unfinished work, or is it something necessary and unavoidable?

My thesis is that the second is the case: it is the implication of our epistemological condition which we can designate as “fallibility.” Fallibility is unavoidable: we accept as the truth those facts which we can reach, or access, and we do not know or cannot know if there is something more out there—even things that may be near, and possibly relevant, to the matter at hand. There are two sides in the process of knowing, the object of knowing and the knowing subject, and these two are in a relationship of *mutual*

interdependence in whatever should be the result of knowing. There are no *raw data* preceding the act of knowing and independent of it. The knowing subject necessarily alters the data to some extent. It may seem trivial, except that this is the very basis for different interpretations of the same reality. In the realm of brute facts, we can say that this is a matter of precision and vagueness, and certainly, to some extent, it is so. We might consider historical examples of radical or cardinal disagreement, such as in the steps of scientific progress. Galilei was right in believing heliocentrism, despite the fact that the prevailing and at the time valid (accepted) geocentric science of his time rejected his beliefs. Michelson-Morley's experiment, which showed the inadequacy of "aether" theory and led to the special theory of relativity, has been accepted in the end; but at first, it was met with suspicion and disbelief. Lobachevsky's theorem of parallels has become a standard of mathematics, but Lobachevsky paid the price of social ostracism because he was the first to state it.³

In the process of acquiring knowledge, we have some epistemological limits that indicate that we can hardly speak of ontological independence and ontological priority as a plausible and valid *theoretical item*. The claim of the primacy of ontology does not seem very informative. Primacy in what sense? In the sense that there *must be* something there preceding our knowledge? That does not tell us much—in fact, it does not tell us anything regarding the properties or characteristics of reality. There is always not only a certain vagueness present in any description of anything counted as "real" (which could be diminished, if not overcome, by the progress of science), but there is a possibility that there is something that we never could reach because it is not accessible via our epistemological tools.

If ontology is about what there is, it seems that we are doomed to stay in an eternal darkness about what there "really" is. If ontology is about what we can reach by

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In ethics we have a similar situation, most notably in utilitarianism and its pretension to being a complete and coherent normative ethical theory, having at its disposal something extremely attractive and seemingly irresistible: namely, the instrument of universal commensurability. This implies the existence of counter-intuitive examples (like punishment of the innocent), which can function as counter-examples only if utilitarianism be taken as an empirical science, dealing with natural items. The only way out from these counter-examples for utilitarianism is to take it as a constitutive rule of an institution, say the institution of "morality" (as they would prefer), and conclude that there we cannot have counter-examples.

means of our knowledge, it seems then that epistemology has primacy—although we may not be prepared to regard this as very important, since the difference between the two, ontology and epistemology, would be only methodological: we have some access to what there is (ontology) by the means of our epistemological tools (epistemology). The issue of independence is an important feature of Searle’s scheme: independence is the assertion that we are dealing here with what Searle, and also Kant, would call “regulative” rules and the realm of their possible application: “[C]onstitutive rules also regulate,” although “they do more than regulate; they constitute etc.” (Searle, 1998, p. 123).

Now we have come to the point: the realm of *possible application* of regulative rules does indeed presuppose that there is something existing independently of the rules— that the reality of that to which the rules are applied is not created by the act of applying the rules. Rather, the reality is independent and prior to any of these rules. So, in a way, the “primacy” of ontology is of a “methodological” nature only: what we have in our entire knowledge is what we “find” in the world as we can grasp it, what we can access, by means of our epistemological powers. In that sense – of course! – ontology has to be taken quite seriously, as the inventory of everything that there *really* is, and nothing else beside it.

But what else could there be? There are some facts out there, and there are some facts contained in the inventory of everything that we can know, and we take the two to be identical. We can know everything knowable, and everything that exists is knowable, so we can know everything that exists. But we do not know that! There is no proof that what there is and what can be known coincide. And even if there were such a coincidence, what will be known in the end is determined not only by what there is (to be known) but also by the “light” that we, as knowing subjects, cast upon the object of knowing. For not only practical but also for explanatory purposes, what “there is” is determined from two sides, ontological and epistemological. There is no visible sense in saying that one of these two “sides” should have primacy over the other.

So, it seems that reciprocal illumination is a kind of epistemological necessity. We cannot avoid the determining of what we know by the shape, capacity, and other features of our epistemology. And since fallibility is the most basic tenet in that epistemology, it seems that this bears some relevance too. This implies that we can adjust

our explanations and other theories by allowing their articulation to be based on those facts that best fit the expectations we have from that explanation or the theory (for whichever purposes we want to have a theory), which opens up the possibility of modeling the “reality” according to what we need or deem suitable. But there are some limits contained in the very structure of the shape, form, capacity, and nature of our knowing power, limiting access to whatever there is or might be. This in turn opens the possibility that there is something that we do not know, and perhaps cannot know (as with Kantian “un-discerned manifold” within the so-called “Thing-in-itself”). It might be redundant to say that whatever this is or might be is outside of our legitimate concern, as it is beyond our reach; except in the sense that it makes implausible for us to say that our ontology can have any kind of primacy, except for practical concerns. But I have the impression that this is not what has been meant in introducing this idea of the primacy of ontology.

What has just been said might be shortened to the following statement: We cannot avoid *some vagueness* when we deal with brute facts. They are either too vague in our perception and understanding, or too complex to be grasped in their entirety, so that whatever we do with them, it always leaves some room for uncertainties, indeterminacies, and arbitrariness. Nature (which is the realm of brute facts) is not a static entity; it changes through time, and the change is never finished (or at least, we have no access to final states of affairs to which nature eventually might come). Contrary to what we may be inclined to think, facts in nature are not “hard” facts, and although “independent,” they are not constant and unchangeable. But the changes are not abrupt and they are not too big—they allow predictability, which is a pre-condition for the possibility of explaining and also regulating what we might want to call “phenomena.” Explanatory statements or sentences function similarly to regulative rules (by explaining something existent independently in the same way in which regulative rules regulate something that exists prior to their application – with some margin of vagueness and in an imperfect way). A kind of logical manifestation of this phenomenon is the presence of the possibility of *counter-examples*. Any theorem or hypothesis could be questioned by offering a counter-example, which in the first instance would function like a falsification of the theorem or the hypothesis, but in the end usually would lead to their refinement

and change. The refinement would normally lead to a new articulation and formulation of some explanatory scheme (a theorem), but actually this would mean a new *description* of the given “fact.” The fact is the same fact, but its description is now different, presumably becoming more precise or plausible, and also relevant and focused.

However, this procedure is not possible within the realm of institutional facts: although they are facts like any other facts, they are not subject to this kind of evaluation. There are no counter-examples there. The application of the rules in the realm of institutional facts is quite different from the realm of brute facts. Institutional facts are much stricter, in the sense that *factuality* matters: institutional facts are not vague in the same sense as brute facts. They might be vague to some, presumably lesser, extent (such as in cases of conflict of different rules and vagueness and/or conflicts between the rules, but especially because of uncertainties contained in procedures of interpretation and application of the rules). But in the case of institutional facts, all of this vagueness is not unavoidable—it could be removed and eliminated. Institutional facts also exist independently of anyone’s *knowledge*, and here I see the importance of the contribution of Ferraris and others regarding documenting. Institutional facts must be provable and demonstrable, and although procedures as well as rules depend on our prior decisions – not intentions! – the results might not be known to anyone in any particular point of time. In this respect they do not differ from brute facts: they do not depend on our prior knowledge; they are “there” independently of us. Moreover, once enacted, activated («declared», as we find in both Searle and Ferraris)⁴, they are very hard facts with little (if any) vagueness therein.

For example, the fact that something is firm (hard to press) is relative to many different parameters (the strength of my fingers, the state of that thing, the external temperature, etc. – most or all of which are changeable). On the other side, the fact that I am married, that I won in a game, or that I have promised something to someone are very hard facts independent of any external change.

⁴ See, respectively, Searle 2010: 11ff; Ferraris 2010.

So, contrary to Ferraris's statement that in the world of natural objects the essential characteristic is «unemendability» (Ferraris 2012: 6.3), it seems that institutional facts cannot be subject to external change (but only to an internal one) in an ongoing process of adjusting to a particular requirement. Accordingly, the question that we face here is: Do we have the regular situation of the reciprocal illumination in the world of institutional facts, as we have in the world of facts representing natural objects, or do we have a different epistemological position here as we create institutional facts, in a way, *at will*? Is our epistemological position in the sphere of institutional facts *stronger* and *more sovereign* than in the world of brute facts? In other words: Is our fundamental, most basic, epistemological position of fallibility actually overcome in the world of social reality?

If the answer is “yes,” a very challenging problem has to be faced. We know that our knowledge within the context of social facts is partial, incomprehensive, incomplete, imperfect, and amenable as in the realm of natural objects, but *the nature* of these defects would be quite different. They would *not depend* on the principled incapacity of our epistemological tools in this area – the fact that we do not have access to the essences, so to speak. It would depend only on the fact that we *actually* do not have the insight to *all relevant parts and aspects* of the phenomenon we are exploring, not because we have any cardinal limits in approaching those parts and aspects. On the contrary, we have access to everything (everything that, as Searle would say, “counts”). The difficulties and obstacles do not stem from the structure of our epistemological powers, but only from the extent to which we manage to control and have at our disposal all the relevant facts. There is no limitation in accessibility to any of these facts in full—the only demand is to come close enough to see what is going on.

If that is so, the sphere of institutional facts would be exempt from the scheme of reciprocal illumination. The price of total accessibility to everything from within this sphere to our cognitive faculties is the absence of any substantial mutuality in the construction of the reality of institutional facts. They are created by our will, but they are not dependent on the back-casting of our cognitive light for their constitution and construction. Once created, they are finished and accomplished; they are facts that are not changeable in this aspect of being. They are complete and absolute in their

epistemological stature. Being well-defined by the specific content of a given constitutive rule, they are epistemologically perfect. Even the possible scope of goals and purposes which can play a role in dealing with them is determined in a definitive, conclusive, decisive way, with nothing really left open: no new functions, no new usages and applications – in other words, no universality, only particularism and compartmentalism. They are closed, and their actuality is, like that of ideal objects, not subject to ongoing changes, deteriorations or emendations. They function like ideal, eternal objects. There is no necessity of fallibility there.

Indeed, the mode of the existence of institutional facts is *sub specie aeternitatis*. They are *not changeable* within the time frame of their existence. The institutional facts, facts of which our social reality consists, are definite, hard facts, not subject to our freedom and also not determined by reciprocal illumination (which is normally the case with “natural facts”). Our social reality is a big part of *our* reality, equally important and in some ways more important (to us) than the natural part of reality. It is intertwined with the world of values (and partly consisting of the values) which make the “logic” of this part of reality complex and challenging. We must say that this logic has *not* been properly investigated; which makes our life much more – but to some extent unnecessarily – difficult, worse, and costly.

And now, this is the point at which we might pass to my other thesis, the issue of irreversibility.

II. The irreversibility. The distinction “external/internal”

Social reality can be conceived as a set of facts (it must be factual in order to be “reality”) contained in an inventory of instances, all of which began in a particular, specified point which is characterized by the feature of irreversibility. Some prior external conditions («C», mentioned at many places in Searle), are needed also, of course, but, despite not being entirely trivial, these conditions are more a kind of *pre-condition* than full-fledged conditions. Every social fact has to “parasitize” or supervene on some brute facts, but the physical part does not constitute a part of the reality of the institutional fact; for example,

the paper of the banknote is not a part of the reality of the money, and the money carried by some other brute fact (such as some metal or electronic inscription) is exactly the same as the paper money, not different in a no-matter-how small part. The crucial part is the point of beginning. All other subsequent points in time, which need to be preserved in some way – “documented” – depend on this first point.

We may find that social reality is rather complex not only in the magnitudes and variety of its forms, but also in many accompanying features and their combinations. For example, chess or money differ significantly from marriage and war by the lesser strictness of the rule-content in the latter examples, having, in a way less, defined borders in determining what is “in” and what is “out.” But to the extent they *are* institutional facts, after the point of their constitution – and this is the only way for them to exist at all! – they are independent of anyone’s beliefs about what exists and what does not exist. The constitutive rule by which they were enacted makes them real and independent – once they are there.

Collective acceptance and recognition (Searle 2010: 8) is the crucial part of “enactment,” but this is true of rules, not of facts – recognition does not imply approval of the factuality of institutional facts. That which is the object of recognition is not the factuality of the facts but the validity of the rules, and the only factuality we have here is the fact of endurance of this validity through time—in other words, the fact of lasting validity of the rules.

Recognition has something *active* in its meaning, something that makes those who “recognize” doing more than just *admit* what has been recognized: it is *acknowledged* and *endorsed*, or *authorized*, even if not *approved* in the strong sense of being actively “for it.” It is more than tolerating, certainly. (Toleration entails more than enduring—it is *actively allowing* to others something that is not only unpleasant to us, but also something that we do not approve for ourselves). What is relevant here is the issue of collective identity.

Having a collective belief is not, as Searle might have meant it (Searle 2010: 42), “sharing” beliefs, or even sharing desires and attitudes, but rather it is having the capacity for joint decision-making. This capacity to make decisions, and, per implication, to bear responsibility (to be imputable to accountability) and to be subject of evaluation, is what

makes social reality the true realm of freedom in a crucial way (although there is no freedom in the factuality of those decisions upon being enacted: decisions create a reality of institutional facts, the facts whose existence, although dependent on the prior social decisions, is independent of the “knowing subject”).

Intentionality, collective or not, so often present in Searle and others, and the decision-making that follows, carry what Searle calls «deontic powers» (Searle, 2010: 9ff), which bring the load of normative capacity to institutional facts—and because of which they have often been *confused with values*. Collectives as wholes can have the power to decide, and in that case they assume a kind of *identity*—which means that belonging to them entails a specific kind of participation, something more than mere membership. They are a form of life (this life could be defined as an *activity* of setting goals and attempting to realize them, freedom being the *capacity* to set goals and attempt to realize them), but the articulation of this “form” may vary: it can be “thick” (like nation, state, or family etc.) or “thin” (like a club, or group of fans); it may last for long time, or be a short lived collective, etc. Location is not a necessary feature of being a member of a collective or community, although many of them are territorial (cultures, for instance) and some, like states, include territory as a part of their definition. “A group walking together in a park” is a short-lived collective; “Jewish people” is a very long-lived collective; “clashes with the police” is a demonstration of a conflict between two distinct collectives. Deontic powers attached to this kind of collective gives them an identity which cannot be reduced to an aggregate (like a queue in front of a desk, or a group of people watching a movie in a cinema).⁵ Collectives are capable of creating constitutive rules – pretty much in the same way as individuals, that is *freely*, deciding to enact them by applying a valid rule, after which they become real. This defines an irreversible point, after which something that didn’t exist begins to be a fact – and exist in full.

The function of this process of making our (collective) decisions factual is rather obvious: it is to freeze and solidify the freedom from which they, the institutional facts, come. They exist because we *believe* they do. But this believing is not an arbitrary or free

⁵ Gilbert 1996: 177; cf. also Gilbert 2010: 39.

act: these facts *came into existence* because we *decided* to enact some existing, valid, constitutive rule, and they *continue* to exist because we continue to believe that those rules are still valid. The first is the point – the point of irreversibility, the irreversible point – in which an institutional fact starts to exist, and this point changes the world by adding a new fact to it. The second is the duration of the existence of an institutional fact, which can be longer or shorter. Within this *period of time*, what we have as part of the “fact” – the factuality part – is that our freedom to do what we have done in that first (“irreversible”) point is cardinally limited, virtually “frozen.” It could be unfrozen only via a point that is analogous to the one we had at the beginning, by ending the “fact” that has endured for some time. So the function of institutional facts is actually the control of time, control of our *future* time – giving us something that might be designated as a “maximum of predictability.” This predictability, and the maximum of it, constructs the structure of the social world, which is the process of managing and arranging our acts and practices into a web of what is the factual side of what we do, including the consequences thereof.

So, when I give a promise, I decide to do something. But this requires that I also decide *not* to use a certain sub-set of reasons and arguments from the whole set of such reasons and arguments. These would be the reasons and arguments which may be used to decide otherwise *after* the point of decision, and the decision therefore amputates this subset from any actual consideration to be potentially used in the future. The important part of the logic of normativity contained here, the one we mentioned above discussing the absence of counter-examples, is that breaking the rule is not a negation of the factuality of the given promise: it is still valid even if breached. The fact of the existence of reasons *against* giving the promise in the first place does not change anything here. For example, even if I hesitated to make a promise, having strong opposing reasons against it, the fact that I just *forgot* certain important reasons—reasons so important that I wouldn’t have made the promise in the first place had I remembered these reasons—all that does not make the promise any less real, nor less obliging. This is because the function of the promise is to narrow and restrict the domain of the available reasons in my further decision-making, and thereby determine the future.

Social reality is a web of segments which are defined by the irreversible points of their enactments, after which they begin to exist. The concept of irreversible points at the beginning and, per hypothesis, at the end of the period of existence of an institutional fact defines what Searle covers by the concepts of «intentionality» and «collective intentionality».⁶ I think that Ferraris and others are right to introduce the issue of continuation through concepts of documentality, registering, archiving, etc., all of which focus on the issue of how institutions and the facts within them actually (really) exist and continue to exist. The independence of factuality of institutional facts cannot exist without registering, documenting, archiving, and data-mining procedures. The computerization and globalization of the world through the Internet only produces an additional pressure in this area, although the logic of it has always been the same. However, I do not believe that documentality should *replace* what Searle means by “intentionality” – there is no need and, I believe, possibility, for such a replacement. Intentionality is the prerequisite to decision-making, and without decision-making, institutional facts wouldn’t exist in the first place. So, I do not see a contradiction, or tension, between “intentionality” and “documentality”.

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The ending point might be conceived, and happen, in two different ways: first by the act analogous to the enactment, but reverse to it, through an act of revoking the prior act of enactment (like in laws), or when some institutional fact would “expire,” such as when the institution within which it was a fact ceases to exist.

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