Social ontology and political theory
John Searle and the notion of power

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Social Ontology and Political Theory
John Searle and the Notion of Power

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Introduction

Reality is an issue for political theory, as it is for social science and for social theory in general. If we can accept this, then ontology — no matter how much some theorists may protest that it is of no interest to them — is a subject that needs to be addressed. Ontology, the philosophy of existence, studies the nature of reality. And ontological preconceptions — ideas about how reality exists and what exists within it — pervade the study of reality and the phenomena within it.

There is a widespread argument in the history of philosophy that ontology is unknowable. The manner in which this kind of argument is formulated varies widely. However, it generally comes with a conception of knowledge — an epistemology — that stresses the importance of scepticism and the idea that what can be known about reality must be mediated by a scientific method of some sort. This is one way that the question of ontology can be addressed. This type of answer and the questions it poses are not the interest of this thesis. The interest here is if we can know something about the nature of existence, if ontology is knowable through philosophical inquiry. What if we were able to know what reality is like — in a general philosophical sense — and how it exists? What would this mean for the theories that study it?

In this thesis, I will study the implications of ontology for political theory. This type of theory — as is the case for the different social sciences and social theory in general — studies social objects. Therefore, the type of reality that is of interest is social reality. And in recent years there has been a growing consensus that the type of ontology that studies this kind of reality should be named “social ontology”. The question I pose then is: if we can know how social reality exists — if we can provide a description of social ontology — what implications, if any, might this have for how we theorise social phenomena?

Philosophical inquiry into the nature and existence of the social realm and the phenomena within it — whether or not this pursuit is explicitly named social ontology — is both a new and very old pursuit. In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on this question and a wealth of research has been published under the name “social ontology”. This research is varied and contributions are, for the moment, split between
two largely separate schools of thought from very different philosophical backgrounds. I will present the divide in the current literature in chapter one.

John Searle, an American philosopher based at Berkeley, is currently the only proponent of social ontology who engages with, and whose writings have been influential for, both schools of thought. Searle, who has been a prominent analytic philosopher for over fifty years, originally became known as a proponent of speech act theory and the philosophy of mind and consciousness\(^1\). In recent years — first in 1995 with *The Construction of Social Reality* and then, most recently, in 2010 with *Making the Social World* — Searle has turned, in what he sees as the logical continuation of his earlier work, to outlining a description of the way he believes that social reality exists. Moreover, Searle draws links in the latter book between social ontology and the way that we understand concepts in political theory — namely the notion of power.

I concede straight away that my general line of inquiry stated above — the implications social ontology might have for political theory, in all their respective theoretical diversity — is too large a question to answer within the confines of this thesis. Therefore, keeping my ambition in check, my approach will be to focus my analysis on the way that these general issues manifest themselves within Searle’s body of work. For the reasons alluded to above, Searle’s foray into social ontology seems a most appropriate test subject. My approach will be to conduct an internal comparison of Searle’s description of social ontology and his understanding of the notion of power to see what implications, in this specific case, social ontology has for political theory.

There is one issue, however, with the way that Searle understands social ontology that I think is important to address immediately. He asserts that social ontology is either a new subject of research in philosophy or, at the very least, one that has not been studied in a very long time:

> It is an odd fact of intellectual history that the great philosophers of the past century had little or nothing to say about social ontology. I am thinking of such figures as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, as well as Quine, Carnap, Strawson, and Austin. (Searle, 2010, p.6)

Searle’s view of “the great philosophers of the past century” is a somewhat restricted one. Though the analytic tradition of philosophy has historically had very little to say on this issue, it is simply wrong to state that no recent great philosophers had anything to say about social ontology (Gilbert, 2007).

Researchers at the University of Vienna claim that the first recorded use of the term “social ontology” can in fact be found in notes made by Edmund Husserl in one of his manuscripts circa 1910. Moreover, though Searle might not consider such continental thinkers, as he would put it, “intellectually respectable”, Martin Heidegger’s body of work and all the existentialist literature that followed are nothing if not preoccupied by what is now called social ontology. Indeed, in chapter four of this thesis I will argue that Jean-Paul Sartre and Cornelius Castoriadis had very similar ideas to Searle about social reality. Furthermore, much has been written about the nature of social reality outside the realm of pure philosophy. Though social ontology might seem like a new philosophical pursuit to someone exclusively versed in analytic philosophy, it is not.

What is somewhat novel about certain current approaches to the study of social ontology — and which is of particular interest to the preoccupations of this thesis — is that much contemporary research is conducted in response to a problem encountered by disciplines that study the social world, which Tony Lawson (1997, p.174) calls the “epistemic fallacy”. This fallacy is the idea that knowledge is simply the product of “the scientific method”. Therefore, no matter what it is that one would like to know, the way to access that knowledge is by applying “the scientific method” to that object. The accusation is that this has been done blindly in the realm of social science and social theory and that inappropriate methods have consequently been used to try and understand social phenomena, with poor results. To resolve this, it is argued that political theory, social science, and social theory should use methods that correspond to the nature of the phenomena they are studying. Lawson refers to this position as “realism”. One aim for contemporary social ontology is therefore to improve our

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2 Evidence of this is presented on the website of Social Ontology and Philosophy of Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna. See reference list.
3 See, for example, Heidegger (1927/2010) and Sartre (1943, 1960)
4 See, for example, Berger and Luckmann (1966)
understanding of the nature of social phenomena and, in doing so, to “help our research in the social sciences” (Searle, 2010, p.5).

It might seem like political theory would not experience the kinds of problems that an overreliance on the scientific method may have posed in mathematized social scientific disciplines such as economics, for example, and increasingly in areas of political science and sociology. The aim of this thesis is precisely to see if this is the case — to see if political theory has really managed to more appropriately analyse the phenomena it studies. The question is: even if the conceptual structures of political theories are less influenced by a type of reasoning that is accused of being inappropriate for social material, does that mean that the way that political theory conceptualises its subjects necessarily corresponds better to the nature of that material?

I know that I will not be able to provide a general answer to this question in this thesis. Rather, my approach, as stated above, will be to take a particular account of social ontology — Searle’s — and test it against his own theories of power and political power. By restricting the analysis in this way, I hope to be able to avoid some of the complications that would arise by having to include differing pictures of social ontology or varying theories about the social and political concepts at hand. The point is not to provide a general answer but rather to see what kinds of issues analysing this isolated case raises. What contradictions might we find if we confront an individual theorist’s vision of reality and a theory about a political phenomenon within that reality? If discrepancies arise, this will at least show that political theory is not entirely immune to these issues.

I will conduct this analysis as follows. In chapter one, I will present the most recent literature in social ontology and how Searle fits into this landscape. In chapter two, I will outline Searle’s description of social ontology. In chapter three, I will outline Searle’s theories of power and political power and compare them to his theory of social reality. Finally, in chapter four, I will discuss the issues raised for political theory by the comparison between Searle’s social ontology and his theory of power.

If reality can be known, what might that mean for how we think about it? By looking at what issues one theorist’s attempt to describe reality might pose for his own theorising of that same reality, my aim is to provide some small indication as to the more general problems reality might present for political theory.
Chapter One | What Is Reality?

1.1. Social Ontology

Social ontology is the study of social reality. Or, in other words, it is the study of the nature of the existence of social phenomena. And it has, at least as implicit presuppositions, the following ideas: first, that the social domain has a somewhat distinct nature of existence and, second, that understanding the nature of social phenomena is useful for our more general understanding of those phenomena, that is, what we do in political theory, social science, and social theory. Put simply, the argument for doing social ontology is: when we study something, we should know how that thing exists. Social ontology is the study of the part of reality that we call “social” and it is pursued to help us to better understand these phenomena.

Now this might seem like a vague definition, and it is. One reason for this is that the subject matter deals with an abstract notion — existence — and how it applies to a domain — the social — the borders of which are difficult to define. Another is that if a definition is to be inclusive of the different approaches that name themselves “social ontology”, we cannot get much more precise than my attempt above. I am seemingly, however, not alone in finding the question of definition problematic. Those proposed by the most prominent academics currently practising in this field are also ostensibly quite vague. The “Editorial Note” in the first issue of the Journal of Social Ontology states:

Social Ontology encompasses a wide variety of inquiries into the nature, structure and perhaps essence of social phenomena, and their role and place in our world. (Schmid et al., 2015, p.v)

Raimo Tuomela’s definition is:

[S]ocial ontology [...] can be broadly understood to cover all kinds of entities and properties that rational study of the social world is taken to need. (Tuomela, 2013, p.2)

John Searle characterizes the study of social ontology as seeking to:
[E]xplain the fundamental nature and mode of existence — what philosophers call the essence and the ontology — of human social institutional reality. (Searle, 2010, p.ix)

Tony Lawson (2015a, p.21 [emphasis in original]) believes that “social ontology is [...] the study of the social realm in total” where:

[The] social realm is [...] that domain of all phenomena, existents, properties, etc. (if any), whose formation/coming into existence and/or continuing existence necessarily depend at least in part upon human beings and their interactions. (Lawson, 2015a, p.21 [emphasis in original])

These definitions may all seem as though they are referring, generally, to similar things. This would explain why they have all chosen to name what they are doing “social ontology”. However, the necessarily general nature of these definitions masks important differences between the research contributions of the above-cited authors, and within social ontology more generally as it is practised today. My aim, therefore, in this first chapter, is to identify what different kinds of social ontology there currently are. This is important as it will then allow us to determine what kind of social ontology John Searle is pursuing, and what exactly his theory aims to find out.

I propose that there are presently two main different types of social ontology. This is due to the fact that research into social ontology has been developed, and is largely currently conducted, within two different schools of philosophical thought that have not engaged with one another on this issue. These schools of philosophical thought are critical realism — the tradition that Tony Lawson and the Cambridge Social Ontology Group (CSOG) work in — and analytic philosophy — to which, in very general terms, all other contributors to social ontology belong. I will refer therefore to there being two different schools of social ontology: critical realist social ontology, which I will also refer to as the Cambridge school, and analytic social ontology.

Analytic social ontology would therefore seem to, at first, include John Searle and, judging by his philosophical background and the literature in which he has partaken, this would be correct. However, I believe Searle’s current research, in the form that it
has taken in his most recent work of social ontology, *Making the Social World*, is now much closer to the implicit preconceptions and concerns of the critical realist school of social ontology. Moreover, Searle has recently become personally engaged with critical realist social ontology and Lawson. This is important because critical realist social ontology has developed its approach with the explicit aim of using social ontology to influence the way that we do social science. It is in this sense that the vision of social ontology that Searle presents in *Making the Social World* will influence the way that a social phenomenon such as power is conceptualised.

What specifically is the difference between critical realist and analytic social ontology? To answer this question systematically, let us first go back and set out clearly what understanding of "ontology" will inform this analysis. "[O]ntology [...] is the [...] study of being" (Lawson, 2015, p.19). Ontology is a facet of philosophical inquiry that focuses on what exists and how those things exist. It is distinct, under the umbrella of philosophy, from, for example, epistemology — the study of knowledge — that asks what can be known, and how it is those things can be known. Ontology is philosophical inquiry that aims specifically to understand existence or being — I will use the terms “existence” and “being” interchangeably.

Recently, the Cambridge school has asserted that there are two main categories of ontological inquiry. I think it is important to examine this proposal straight away as it provides us, on the one hand, with a first look at the way one of the traditions in question conceptualises how ontology is studied and, on the other, with a potential basis for distinguishing between approaches to studying ontology.

The two types of ontological study are philosophical ontology, “[t]he study of how existents exist” and scientific ontology, “[t]he study of what is, or what exists, including the study of the nature of specific existents” (Lawson, 2015, p.19 [emphasis in original]). Furthermore:

Philosophical ontology typically elaborates on the properties common to all objects in a relevant domain and is exhaustive in the sense that it seeks to derive a general conception [...]. [...] Scientific ontology is the study of the particular types of entities and processes postulated by some substantive scientific or other theory and involves consideration of their nature, structure or mode of being. (Pratten, 2007, p.51)
In other words, philosophical ontology attempts to outline a general conception of what exists by looking at what is common to all of those things that are conceived to be included in the domain of existence studied. Scientific ontology, however, looks at which specific entities exist and how they exist, and consists of specific studies of entities that are postulated to exist. If we extend this understanding to social ontology then, “[s]ocial-scientific ontology [is] the study of what is, or what exists, in the social realm, including the nature of specific social existents of interest” and “[s]ocial-philosophical ontology [is] the study of how social phenomena exist, their modes of existence, connections between social existents, common properties, and so on” (Lawson, 2015, p.30 [emphasis in original]).

To specify, examples of social-scientific ontological studies conducted by members of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group “include conceptions of technology (Faulkner and Runde, 2009 [...]], gender (Lawson, 2007), money (Ingham, 1999, 2004; Tony Lawson, 2012), the corporation (Deakin, 2012; Tony Lawson, 2012)”. As can be seen by the subject matter of these social ontological studies, they are focused on specific entities that are considered to socially exist and inquiry focuses on elaborating how these entities exist.

I believe that for this reason — the more restricted focus of study: one social object as opposed to the social realm in general — social-scientific ontology is in fact a secondary pursuit of social ontology, or at least one that can only be pursued once an adequately developed philosophical-ontological account has been proposed. Social-philosophical ontology is the type of study that pursues “the study of the social realm in total” or “the fundamental nature [...] of human social institutional reality”, as Lawson (2015a, p.21) and Searle (2010, p.ix) defined social ontology, respectively.

I am not discounting the distinction proposed by the Cambridge school. I am stating that, first and foremost, social ontology is what they now call social-philosophical ontology: the pursuit to provide a general account of the existence of the social realm. However, once a picture of the social realm in general has been proposed, it is important to study how this can relate to specific social entities and how this conforms to, or differs from, how these entities have been conceptualised in their respective literatures. That is to say that, as a first specification, the general type of social ontology that will be the focus of this thesis is social-philosophical ontology, the general study of the ontology
of the social realm with the aim of providing a general account of the nature of its existence.

The approaches presented above — those of Searle, Lawson, and Tuomela — are all projects, even if aspects of their research focus on social-scientific ontological questions, that are pursuing, as their end goal, a social-philosophical ontology. From now on when I use “social ontology” it is to this pursuit of a general account of the ontology of social reality that I am referring.

This has, however, not brought us closer to identifying the distinction that exists between critical realist and analytic social ontology. Though both are seeking a general outline of the nature of the existence of the realm that they call social, I believe that the difference lies in that they are not referring to the same thing when they say “social”. These two projects that aim to outline the general nature of the existence of a realm of phenomena that they call social are in fact outlining the ontologies of quite different things. First, let us look at what “social” means for critical realist social ontology.

### 1.2. Critical Realist Social Ontology

Critical realist social ontological research has been going on, in Cambridge, for over thirty years. For the most part, it has been conducted by economists. Their interest in ontology responds to the belief that fundamental methodological issues exist in economics, and therefore in all likelihood with similar implications in the wider realm of social science and social theory. Specifically, this concern is largely focused on the assertion that the mainstream of economics has failed, and continues to fail, to render intelligible the phenomena it is trying to explain. The Cambridge group is united around the potential that the critical realist philosophy of Roy Bhaskar, and its focus on ontology, might have for providing an explanation as to why that might be the case.

This research agenda began informally, “[in] Cambridge […] individuals have been working on issues in social ontology since the 1980s” (Pratten, 2015b, p.1). In 1990, a research group named the Cambridge Realist Workshop was launched, which continues to meet weekly. This group formed in response to an open letter in which Lawson states ontology to be, for him, the fundamental issue in the philosophy of social science:

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5 For more on critical realism see Bhaskar (1975/2008, 1979/2015, 2007)
[I]t is a presupposition of the realist programme that questions of ontology are in some sense prior to, and bear upon, questions of epistemology and methodology [...] (Cited in Pratten, 2015b, p.3)

However, as the name indicates, the focus of the Cambridge Realist Workshop is critical realism, which deals with a plethora of philosophical issues, not just in developing an account of social ontology. Finally then, “the establishment in October 2002 of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group” occurred and it is in this smaller group where the elaboration of the account of critical realist social ontology continues today (Pratten, 2015b, p.3).

Critical realism’s general approach to ontology is that its study is positioned as responding to a deficiency in science:

When science is doing normal science, when things are going well, epistemically it is natural to adopt what I call this “natural attitude” in which you don’t posit ontology on the one side and epistemology on the other: you just have knowledge and you take it that that knowledge is of the world. Ontology really only becomes relevant when you are not satisfied with knowledge, when what passes for knowledge is patently wrong or absurd. (Bhaskar, 2007, p.192 [emphasis in original])

The knowledge that passed as “wrong or absurd” for the Cambridge group was that produced by mainstream economics. The reason why they believed the knowledge produced by this school of thought was wrong — outlined in detail in Lawson (1997, 2003, 2006) — was that the picture of reality presupposed by the theory’s method — mathematical modelling — was not realistic. For example, the individuals of mainstream economic theory must be isolated atoms, but human beings are not isolated atoms.

The charge laid is that social science and social theory, to produce good outcomes, must be realist in the sense that the picture of the world presupposed by a theory must conform to how the world is. “[T]he argument for ontology is really the same as that for realism” (Bhaskar, 2007, p.198). The argument is that social science should try and explain the world by using methods that reflect the reality of that world.
This, however, poses the question: what is the reality of that world? That is where social ontology comes in.

Social ontology, in the way that it is conceived by the Cambridge school, is responding specifically to what it considers to be the needs of social science, that is, to know the nature of the reality that these disciplines are trying to understand. The accusation is that social science, generally, does not know how the things that it is studying exist and that, in short, we really do not know what we are doing in social science. Therefore the ontology they are trying to outline is that of the objects conceptualised and studied by social science: social structures. This is quite different, as we will see later, to what is studied, first and foremost, in analytic social ontology.

The account proposed by critical realist social ontology, in a simplified form, is as follows. It begins with Lawson's definition, cited above, of social ontology as the study of the social realm: “that domain of all phenomena [...] whose [...] existence necessarily depend [...] upon human beings and their interactions” (Lawson, 2015a, p.21 [emphasis in original]). Already, this definition specifies that the social domain, for critical realist social ontology, is that grouping of phenomena that is dependent on human beings and their interactions. The ontology studied here is not of the way human beings exist or interact, but of the reality that exists in a dependent way on the existence of human beings and their interactions — the level of reality that emerges from us.

That human beings exist and interact is the base condition for the existence of the social realm, “human beings qua social beings are always beings in social relations” (Lawson, 2012, p.369). The object of study is then all of reality that results from this. The account of social ontology provided by critical realist social ontology is that social reality is made up of a variety of interrelating social structures where:

[S]ocial structure is [...] a general category that collects together the collective practices, acceptances, positions, rules, rights, obligations and such like that are emergent features of human actions and interactions and which relationally organise the individuals as communities. So the picture is one of emergent social-structural organisation-in-process. Such social structure is [...] emergent in the sense of being dependent upon, but distinct from, and ontologically and causally irreducible to, the individual activities that it serves in turn to facilitate and coordinate. (Lawson, 2012, p.372)
In other words, the structures that make up the social realm exist as a result of the interaction of human beings — they are the product of that interaction. These structures, however, exist such that they are irreducible to the interactions of the human beings that create them and take on a life of their own to the extent that they condition and organise the actions of those same human beings. But at the same time, the existence of the social structures continues to depend on the actions and interactions of human beings to reproduce those existing structures. And as a result “social structure [...] is continually undergoing transformation, whether intended or unintended, understood or hardly recognised” (Lawson, 2012, p.373).

Social structures, and therefore social reality, exist, according to critical realist social ontology, in a continually dependent way upon the actions of human beings:

When we come to act, the contents of previous acceptances, whether embedded in agreements, precedents or whatever, are given to us; and through our acting we both draw on them (whether or not we are explicitly aware of this) and also (if typically unintentionally) contribute not just to the reproduction of social structures but also to their transformation. (Lawson, 2012, p.373)

Therefore:

Social reality is everywhere intrinsically dynamic in nature. (Lawson, 2012, p.373)

This is the point. The nature of the existence of the social realm is that the structures that constitute it are in a process of continual transformation because their existence is determined by the actions, intended and unintended, of human beings.

For our purposes, the important thing to note here is that, though the interaction of human beings and the existence of a realm dependent upon that interaction is obviously inextricably interconnected, the focus of critical realist social ontology is to

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understand the way that the entities — social structures — that emerge from the interaction of human beings exist. The “social” in social ontology is referring here to the varied and changing realm of social structures that critical realist social ontology calls social reality. This is not the case in analytic social ontology. The focus of analytic social ontology is precisely the interaction between human beings and the way that this is coordinated. The existence of this coordination is what analytic social ontology studies and this occurs around their central notion: intentionality.

1.3. Analytic Social Ontology

It is quite bizarre really to write “analytic social ontology”. It could have been almost oxymoronic before the middle of the twentieth century with how little interest the analytic school paid to either ontology or the social. “On the whole the analytic tradition has been relatively uninterested in understanding the social domain” (Gilbert, 2007, p.31). Quine (1949, 1953) reintroduced the study of ontology but restricted it to what types of ontological commitments are made in specific statements (Latsis, 2007). The focus on the social came later with the contributions of Searle, Margaret Gilbert, Tuomela and others.

In very recent times, then, the analytic school of social ontology — built upon the work of the authors cited above — has sought to institutionalise itself. In 2007, Frank Hindriks, Hans Bernhard Schmid, and David Schweikard founded the European Network on Social Ontology. In 2012, the International Social Ontology Society was created — Tuomela is president and Hindriks vice president. Finally, in 2015, the Journal of Social Ontology was launched. These developments happened alongside the creation and continuing existence of the Berkeley Social Ontology Group, built around Searle, which was founded in 2005.

This brand of social ontology, however, is very different to the critical realist approach described above. What I am trying to highlight here is that, though both schools recognise the interconnectedness of human interaction and the social structures that exist as a result, the emphasis on what is important to study differs enormously. To a certain extent, critical realist social ontology takes human social interaction as given. In contrast, analytic social ontology pays less attention to emergent social reality, as it sees it as being simple to understand once human coordination is understood. The focus,
then, of analytic social ontology is intentionality — the directedness of the mind. Or, in other words:

[A] fancy philosopher’s term for that capacity of the mind by which it is directed at, or about, objects and states of affairs in the world, typically independent of itself. (Searle, 2010, p.25)

Furthermore, is it the fact that human beings have the capacity for collective intentionality, that is, we can act as groups, which is manifested, for example, as “sentences of the form ‘We are doing such and such,’ ‘We intend to do such and such,’ ‘We believe such and such’” (Searle, 2010, p.43). As Tuomela (2013, p.14) states:

The theory is concerned especially with shared and joint aspects of the social world such as joint intentions, mutual beliefs, common knowledge, joint action, joint authority, collective commitment, and collective action dilemmas — as well as social groups and institutions. (Tuomela, 2013, p.14)

The questions, as conceptualized by Tuomela, are all regarding the manner in which human interaction manages to coordinate, with “social groups and institutions” as only an additional concern. This is completely different to the critical realist view outlined above, where human interaction is embraced as unpredictable and this fact strongly influences the dynamic picture of social reality that they describe. For critical realists, the inner workings, or even the possibility of a rational explanation for the manner in which human beings are able to coordinate and collectively accept things is not particularly important.

This main difference is there in Tuomela’s definition of social ontology — the study “of entities and properties that rational study of the social world is taken to need” (Tuomela, 2013, p.2). This focus on a logical ordered explanation is a trademark of analytic philosophy and this explains, in part, why an ordered theory of human interaction is the focus of this school of social ontology. For analytic social ontology, the phenomena produced by human interaction will be explained by a rational understanding of that interaction:
Regarding the conceptual aspects of social institutions, we-mode collective acceptance (construction) is the crucial conceptual explanans. (Tuomela, 2013, p.219)

This is demonstrated by the latest research from the analytic school regarding the way in which emergent social reality exists. Hindriks and Guala (2015, p.460 [emphasis in original]) state that there are three different conceptions of institutions that exist in analytic social ontology, a “rule-based conception” where “institutions are behavioural rules that guide and constrain behavior during social interaction”, an “equilibrium-based conception” where “institutions are the equilibria of strategic games”, and the account that “conceives of institutions as systems of constitutive rules that assign statuses and functions to physical entities”. The constitutive rules account is Searle’s and:

Tuomela thinks that he can get equally powerful results by treating institutional facts as solutions to coordination problems in the game-theoretical sense. (Searle, 2011b, p.734)

The two theories that are not Searle’s, rules and equilibrium, are similar. They are simple in the sense that they provide stable results, on the one hand, fixed rules, and on the other, equilibria resulting from a game theoretical setup. Neither embraces, as do Searle and critical realist social ontology, the complex unpredictable dynamic nature of social reality that results if a somewhat disordered form of human interaction is posited as its foundation. Searle is scathing with regard to the two other accounts:

[O]f the three theories only the third even begins to offer a possible account of institutions. The other two do not have an apparatus rich enough to answer, or even state, the questions. The problem with the first two is not just that they give the wrong answers to the questions, but that they cannot even pose the questions. (Searle, 2015, p.507)

What Searle means here is that neither of the other two accounts makes room for the fact that human beings, who have a certain amount of agency, create this reality. This means that they are unable to conceptualise the kinds of institutional structures that are
entirely created by human beings, which Searle and critical realist social ontology consider to be essential elements of institutional reality, such as “rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions” (Searle, 2015, p.508).

That being said, my task here is not to elaborate a critique of this approach. What I want to highlight is that the focus of study of analytic social ontology is very different to the focus of critical realist social ontology so that, in chapter two, I can situate Searle’s theory as having the same focus as critical realist social ontology. In short, the “social” in analytic social ontology refers, first and foremost, to the way in which human beings interact with each other and the manner in which they are able to coordinate as groups. Searle stated in 2010 that, “Collective intentionality has recently become somewhat of a cottage industry in analytic philosophy. There is even a biennial conference with the title ‘Collective Intentionality’” and he referred to the main authors as being “Margaret Gilbert […] Raimo Tuomela […] Michael Bratman, Seumas Miller, David Velleman, and others” (Searle, 2010, pp.45-46). I am saying that this research into collective intentionality has since been renamed social ontology by analytic philosophers.

The way that the phenomenon of coordinated human interaction exists is the main focus of analytic social ontology. This is an interesting and worthwhile pursuit but it is of less relevance to the analysis that I will conduct here. This is because the answer to the question of how the structures that result from this interaction exist is treated as somewhat unproblematic. These structures are conceptualised to exist in a somewhat stable manner. Critical realist social ontology and Searle’s social ontology have important repercussions for social science precisely because, according to their accounts, the existence of the structures so studied is of a unique and unstable nature.

In summary, there are two types of social ontology currently being pursued: critical realist social ontology and analytic social ontology. Apart from through Searle, there is no contact between these two traditions. On the one hand, critical realist social ontology is focused on the ontology of social structures — all phenomena that are dependent on human beings for their existence. On the other, analytic social ontology is focused on the ontology of human interaction and coordination — how collective intentionality allows for human beings to act as groups. Searle, though he began his

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foray into social ontology by dealing with questions of consciousness and intentionality, now pursues the same type of social ontology as the critical realists, albeit with different views on certain issues. I will elaborate on this argument in chapter two.

1.4. Realism

There is one final concept that is important to clarify in this introductory chapter. That concept is realism. This is important, first, because critical realist social ontology conceives of realism and ontology as having one and the same aim. Furthermore, because “in the history of philosophy the word ‘realism’ has been used with a wide variety of meanings” I want to be clear about what I mean when I use the term realism in this thesis (Searle, 1995, p.153). Specifically, there are two different concepts of “realism” that are important to distinguish between, those of Searle and Lawson. Realism, for Searle, has quite a strict meaning and refers to a belief about the world. For Lawson, however, it refers more specifically to a conception of the way that social science should be done. Lawson’s realism will inform the arguments in this thesis.

Searle’s realism is one that believes in the existence of reality that is independent of our perceptions of it. He formulates this philosophical belief as follows:

I have defined realism as the view that the world exists independently of our representations of it. This has the consequence that if we never existed, if there had never been any representations — any statements, beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, etc. — most of the world would have remained unaffected. Except for the little corner of the world that is constituted or affected by our representations, the world would still have existed and would have been exactly the same as it is now. (Searle, 1995, p.153)

Searle refers to this kind of realism as external realism. He does not, however, think that this concept necessarily implies a constraint on our understanding of the world or that there is therefore one truthful theory for understanding the world. Rather:

[R]ealism, as I am using the term, is not a theory of truth, it is not a theory of knowledge, and it is not a theory of language. If one insists on a pigeonhole, one
could say that realism is an *ontological* theory: It says that there exists a reality totally independent of our representations. (Searle, 1995, p.155)

Searle's realism posits an ontological belief that there exists a domain of reality that is independent of our representations of it. This is important for his larger theory of social ontology to the extent that he holds that the following is:

[T]he fundamental question in contemporary philosophy: How, if at all, can we reconcile a certain conception of the world as described by physics, chemistry, and the other basic sciences with what we know, or think we know, about ourselves as human beings? (Searle, 2010, p.3)

The reality that Searle posits as existing independently of our representations of it is the reality that he believes is described by “physics, chemistry, and the other basic sciences”. And it matters to Searle that the theory of social ontology that he hopes to describe is consistent with the best knowledge that exists of that independently real domain, the facts of which he calls brute facts. It is in this sense — that his social ontology is consistent with what we know of physics and chemistry — that he believes his theory is either realist or not.

Lawson (2012, p.347) calls Searle’s realist position, “ontological naturalism” and is equally committed to this scientific coherence. When Lawson refers to “realism”, however, he means something quite different. He explains his position with regard to the project of methodological reform in economics:

In short, contemporary economics is marked by an effective neglect of [...] (social) being or existence. And the project reported here is motivated by a desire to compensate for this neglect. The objective is to determine a sustainable account of [...] social being with a view both to explaining and resolving numerous problems which beset the discipline [...]. Theories which address these sorts of concerns and involve commitments to the reality of features elaborated are usually collected under the heading of philosophical (or ontological) *realism*. (Lawson, 1997, p.xii [emphasis in original])
Philosophical/ontological realism is the idea that social science should be realist and, to be so, its methods need to respect an outline of reality. It is a relativist concept of realism in the sense that it does not impose what account of ontology needs to be adhered to. It is simply the concept that social science should conform to a vision of reality:

[A]ny position might be designated a realism (in the philosophical sense of the term) [...]. [T]he conception of realism I want to argue for is closely and explicitly bound up with ontology [...]. [T]he term realism is utilised here to denote specific accounts of the nature of reality [...]. [A] realist orientation of the sort I am intending to defend insists that methods of social science can, and indeed should, be designed to take account of available insights concerning the nature of social material. (Lawson, 1997, pp.14-15 [emphasis in original])

Realism, in the sense that Lawson uses it, draws a direct link between the elaboration of an account of social ontology and the requirements imposed on the methods used in social science. If one is a realist, in Lawson’s terms, and one has elaborated what they believe to be the best account possible of social ontology, then one must require that social scientific theories, through the methods they use and in the manner in which they conceptualise the social structures that they are studying, respect the outlined vision of social ontology.

It is in this sense that I will use the term realism and it is by this set of criteria that I will judge the compatibility between the account of social ontology outlined by Searle and his understanding of the notion of political power. Moreover, I believe that Searle is also a realist in Lawson’s sense for the reason that he believes that social ontology is a “philosophy for the social sciences” (Searle, 2010, p.5 [emphasis in original]). Let us now look at Searle’s picture of reality and how it conceptualises the existence of its focus, social structures, or in Searle’s words, social or institutional reality.
Chapter Two | Searle’s Reality

2.1. Context: Brute Facts and Social Science

In this chapter, I will outline Searle’s vision of the nature of the existence of social reality, which, in short, is that human beings create their social reality by declaring, then collectively agreeing or accepting, that certain entities exist. I will look at his description as it is presented in *Making the Social World*, Searle’s latest formulation of his vision of social reality — published in 2010. This followed 1995’s first attempt: *The Construction of Social Reality*. There are differences between the two books and the outlines given of social ontology. Therefore, for consistency’s sake, I will only examine, unless absolutely necessary, the most recent outline.

I seek to underline two main points. First, that Searle’s description of social ontology has the same focus as critical realist social ontology — that domain of existence that is the product of the interaction of human beings. Second, that the reality that Searle describes is one that, although different on some counts, is of the same dynamic and inherently changing nature as the reality outlined by the Cambridge school, which I briefly described in chapter one. I cannot understate the importance of this second point. For it is here that the picture of power that Searle presents in *Making the Social World* comes into conflict with his description of social ontology.

To begin, it is important to set the context in which Searle describes his social ontology. This context structures much of Searle’s argument and determines where the emphasis of the description is placed. However, I hope to show here that much of this contextualisation, which Searle presents as of the utmost importance, is of little constraining consequence to the final picture of social ontology that is presented. Moreover, Searle changes his mind over the course of *Making the Social World* with regard to the importance that his social ontology may or may not have for the study of the social realm — in other words, social science and social theory.

I picture the context Searle posits as two endpoints between which he then believes social ontology lies. On one side there is physical reality. On the other there is social science.

First, Searle contextualises his study by stating how he considers the ontology of the elements that make up the social realm, which he also refers to as nonbasic facts,
must relate to the ontology of the rest of the elements that make up our world, which Searle refers to as brute facts or basic facts. This is Searle’s version of “realism” as explained in part four of chapter one. In short, Searle believes that the ontology of social reality must cohere with the rest of reality:

[T]he basic requirement of our investigation: the account must be consistent with the basic facts and show how the nonbasic facts are dependent on and derived from the basic facts. (Searle, 2010, p.4)

In other words, Searle believes that his outline of social ontology will be successful only if it is consistent with the best understanding that we have of the ontology of the physical world, which he says is given to us by physics, biology, and the natural sciences in general. Moreover, Searle believes that we must be able to show this consistency by demonstrating how social reality is produced from the starting point of physical reality. This part of the context is where Searle believes social ontology must come from.

The other side is why social ontology might be useful. Searle considers that his outline of social ontology will provide, as already cited in chapter one, “a philosophy for the social sciences” (Searle, 2010, p.5 [emphasis in original]). He argues, at the beginning of his book, that social ontology is a worthy pursuit because:

I believe it will deepen our understanding of social phenomena generally and help our research in the social sciences if we get a clearer understanding of the nature and the mode of existence of social reality. (Searle, 2010, p.5)

Searle wavers on this point. However, for the moment let us retain that Searle’s original reason for why social ontology is useful is because it grounds social science in an understanding of ontology. In summary, the context in which Searle outlines his vision of social reality is one where he considers that, on the one side, his description of social ontology must be consistent with our understanding of physical reality and, on the other, it should provide an ontological foundation for social science.

First, then, let us look at why Searle thinks it is important that his outline of social reality be consistent with physical reality and briefly state what, if any, constraining
effect this might have on the description he goes on to elaborate. Searle makes his case at the beginning of *Making the Social World* by stating:

> [T]he fundamental question in contemporary philosophy [is] how, if at all, can we reconcile a certain conception of the world as described by physics, chemistry, and the other basic sciences with what we know, or think we know, about ourselves as human beings? (Searle, 2010, p.3)

That this is “the fundamental question” is a personal preference of Searle’s and why this is such an important criteria is not justified other than for Searle to state that he believes it to be the case. Whether or not this seems like a rational preoccupation is, I believe, by the by. What is important, to my mind, is to understand that this is not a necessary precondition for studying social ontology but, rather, a personal choice of Searle’s. From this, Searle imposes on himself “two conditions of accuracy” for the theory that is to follow:

First, [...] our task is to give an account of how we live in exactly one world, and how all of these different phenomena, from quarks and gravitational attraction to cocktail parties and governments, are part of that one world. [...] A second condition of adequacy is that the account must respect the basic facts of the structure of the universe. These basic facts are given by physics and chemistry, by evolutionary biology and the other natural sciences. We need to show how all the other parts of reality are dependent on, and in various ways derive from, the basic facts. (Searle, 2010, pp.3-4)

The reason why Searle considers the link between social ontology and physical reality to be so important is because he believes that any theory of social reality that he presents can only be accurate if it is consistent with what we know from physics and chemistry, so that it does not contradict the fact that there only exists one world — one overarching reality. Searle believes that the social reality he describes must be able to be traced back to a basic physical fact of some sort, which is his own philosophical preference. Searle posits these conditions of accuracy because he believes that they are important and no further justification is given.
As for the effect of this on his description of social ontology, in fact, this poses no constraint at all on the type of social reality that can be produced by human beings. I will explain why this is, in detail, in parts two and three of this chapter. However, I will state here that Searle considers that it is consistent with his “conditions of accuracy” that it is possible for human beings to create entities that did not previously exist and that do not rest upon any physical fact other than human beings. For Searle, human beings and our consciousness are basic facts. I will come back to this.

What then, does Searle think is the relationship between social ontology and social science or social theory? As stated above, Searle begins Making the Social World with much optimism regarding the role of social ontology in enlightening the understandings pursued by social theory and social science. Social ontology, he says, must be a philosophy for social science. Much like the critical realists, he believes that if we are better informed about the nature of the existence of the thing that we are studying then we will better be able to study that thing, which seems like a very convincing argument to me. However, by the end of the book, Searle makes several concessions to the importance that social ontology might actually have for the work of social scientists. In fact, he almost entirely discounts the influence it might have:

It seems that there are many areas of social science research in which, at least in principle, it is not necessary to understand the foundational issues. (Searle, 2010, p.200)

To illustrate this argument he provides the following example:

When I studied economics as an undergraduate at Oxford, none of my teachers worried about the ontological presuppositions of the investigation. We were taught that Savings equals Investment \( S = I \) in the same tone of voice that in physics one would be taught that Force equals Mass times Acceleration \( F = MA \). [...] I think it is sometimes possible to do good research without worrying about the ontological issues, but the whole investigation gets a greater depth if one is acutely conscious of the ontology of the phenomena being investigated. (Searle, 2010, p.201)
I do not think that this argument is correct and, at any rate, this example is a particularly poor one to try and illustrate it. Let alone the fact that the idea that savings equals investment has been widely debunked since the work of John Maynard Keynes (see Keynes, 1936), this assertion essentially states that the dynamics of social ontology are the same as physical ontology, which would have meant that Searle had wasted an awful lot of time writing a book explaining just how different the creation of social reality is from the existence of the physical world, even though the two are consistent. The entire theoretical foundation upon which critical realist social ontology is built began precisely by highlighting the ontological issues presented by the reliance of economists on mathematical methods that resulted in formulas such as “Savings equals Investment”. For Lawson:

[The explanation of the poor showing of much of modern economics is that mathematical methods are being imposed in situations for which they are largely inappropriate. (Lawson, 2006, p.493)]

The reason why such methods are inappropriate is because, according to critical realist social ontology, the methods chosen when attempting to understand a phenomenon should correspond to the nature of that phenomenon. This correspondence is what Lawson’s realism requires, as explained in part four of chapter one. Mathematical modelling, for example, “includes the restriction that the […] domain is everywhere constituted by sets of isolated atoms.” (Lawson, 2006, p.495). While this might be appropriate for a phenomenon such as force that behaves with the regularity of isolated atoms, in the words of Lawson (2006, p.495), “a world of isolated atoms […] may actually be rather rare in the social realm”.

I will put it more forcefully. Theories in social science have ontological presuppositions and, as I understand it, the reason for studying social ontology is to have a better idea of what the ontology of social phenomena is, so that we can more appropriately choose methods to study it. The aim of social ontology, I am arguing in this thesis, is realism as defined by Lawson. I disagree, therefore, with Searle that “it is […] possible to do good research without worrying about […] ontological issues”. In fact, this is precisely the point of studying social ontology. I believe, also, that Searle’s ontological theory, which I will outline in this chapter, supports this argument. Searle
seems to understand this at the beginning of *Making the Social World* and I cannot understand why, by the end, he seems to have forgotten.

I agree, and will move forward, with Searle’s opening assertion that social ontology is a philosophy for social science. I am going to largely disregard these later statements where he seemingly ignores that claim, though I will go into greater detail about why they are erroneous in part three of this chapter. As stated in chapter one, the idea of realism that will inform my arguments is one where social science should aim to produce theories that are consistent with the reality of the thing that they are studying. The theory of reality at hand is Searle’s description of social ontology and this thesis is about understanding what it might mean for political theory, and consequently social theory and social science, to be held to that standard. I believe that Searle, because much of what he says indicates that this is the case, is also interested in this. The fact that he turns his back on this point seems to me to result more from his desire not to ruffle the feathers of his social scientist colleagues than from the pursuit of his philosophical goals.

But enough about that: I turn now to Searle’s theory proper. First, I will look at the base conditions that Searle sets out to make the existence of the social reality he describes possible. Then I will look at the general claims that Searle makes about the way that the elements of the social world exist.

### 2.2. The Foundation of Social Reality: Human Beings

According to Searle, the foundation upon which all of social reality is built is human beings. Therefore the conditions, which must exist for the creation of social reality to be possible according to Searle, are all claims regarding the abilities that human beings have and how they interact. Nothing that he says is particularly contentious, though he uses a philosophical vocabulary in his writing to refer to things that we take for granted and hence it is not always immediately obvious what he is talking about. This part is about making that clear. Moreover, I hope to underline that this part of Searle’s reasoning is simply setting the base conditions for what is the real focus of his study: the social structures produced by human interaction.

For Searle, social reality is made up of social structures — which he calls social facts and institutional facts — created by human beings. Let us therefore look at how Searle answers the question: what do human beings need to be able to do to produce a type of reality that did not previously exist? I will look at the four elements of this
answer in turn: intentionality, collective intentionality, assignment of function, and language.

Intentionality, as cited in part three of chapter one, is, according to Searle, “a fancy philosopher’s term” for the directedness of the mind — crudely, as I understand it, the ability that brains have to think about things, where the term think is used to refer to the simplest possible process of mind. I say brains in general because, as conceptualised by Searle, neither intentionality or collective intentionality are unique to human beings, animals have these abilities too:

[H]uman beings, along with a lot of other social animals, have the capacity for collective intentionality. (Searle, 2010, p.43)

The idea that human beings are able to think about things will not, I hope, come across as a particularly contentious position. The reason why Searle believes that it is important to start here is because it is with intentionality, and the idea of consciousness more generally, that he makes the link between the human beings that create social reality and the knowledge of biology and physics that he holds dear. Searle claims that:

[I]ntentionality [is] a natural biological phenomenon that has interesting logical properties. [...] [N]atural brain processes, at a certain level of description, have logical semantic properties. They have conditions of satisfaction, such as truth conditions, and other logical relations; and these logical properties are as much a part of our natural biology as is the secretion of neurotransmitters into synaptic clefts. (Searle, 2010, p.42)

For Searle, if intentionality is a natural biological phenomenon then everything that it produces can be reduced back to that, meaning that his “realist” requirement is met.

Searle has a theory of the logical structure of intentionality that mirrors, in large part, his theory of linguistics. I will not go into either here because these theories are complex, formal, analytic, philosophical theories that would require more space that I have available in this thesis and, more importantly, I do not believe that this formal
apparatus has much bearing on the dynamics of the constructed social reality that we are here to study.

What is important is that human beings can direct their minds and can do so, at least as far as we know, in a manner free of any consequential constraint:

Whether we like it or not, in our dealings with the world we are forced to presuppose freedom of the will. (Searle, 2010, p.41)

It is important to note here that Searle’s (2010, p.31) basic theory of intentionality includes two concepts, “the notion of the Network and the notion of the Background”, which will become important during our discussion of Searle’s theory of power, and therefore are worth presenting now. For Searle, the existence of the Network and the Background are crucial if intentionality is to function. Though we are not aware that they are there, without them, according to Searle, intentionality would not be possible:

[T]he Network [is] [...] a set of intentional states most of which are unconscious at any moment, and the Background [is] [...] a set of abilities, dispositions, and capacities. [...] [I]n practice there is no sharp dividing line if only because the unconscious elements of the Network when they are unconscious consist in the Background ability to bring them to consciousness. [...] What I take for granted, when I form the intention, for example, to drive my car to the office, is both a set of beliefs and desires (the Network) and a set of abilities (the Background). (Searle, 2010, pp.31-32)

What this means is that we cannot direct our minds toward something unless there is an existing context in which for us to do so. This comes in the form of a set of wants and desires — the kinds of things that I would say constitute a person’s personality — and a set of ways of doing things that make it possible to actualise the thing that the mind is directed at — Searle calls these ways of doing things abilities. Moreover, Searle says the Background is:

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Related to other discussions in contemporary philosophy. I think that much of Wittgenstein’s later work is about what I call the Background. And if I understand him correctly, Pierre Bourdieu’s important work on the “habitus” is about the same sort of phenomena that I call the Background. (Searle, 1995, p.132)

I include this not to now discuss Bourdieu and Wittgenstein. I do not have room in this thesis to do so. I include this reference because I think it is an interesting insight into how Searle sees his concept’s relationship to other philosophical thought. Moreover, I think it lends some weight to the argument I will make that the Network and the Background are nothing more than the types of social conditioning to which we are all subject at the hands of the social structures that Searle describes as making up the social realm. I will argue in part four of chapter three that what Searle calls the Network and the Background are nothing more than the fact that human beings live in a world of social structures that have a power of conditioning and provide contexts for action, which I think is clear when Searle’s description of social structures is applied consistently to all those entities that make up the social realm.

In summary, the first thing that human beings have that makes the creation of the social world possible is intentionality — the capacity to direct the mind, which is done in a context of desires and abilities.

However, there is another form of this, which according to Searle is also essential to the creation of social reality: collective intentionality. As stated in chapter one, collective intentionality is “first-person plural forms of intentionality as in sentences of the form ‘We are doing such and such,’ ‘We intend to do such and such,’ ‘We believe such and such’” (Searle, 2010, p. 43).

Quite simply, this means that, not only are human beings able to direct their minds, they are also able to direct their minds in a way in which the outcome of that direction is dependent on the direction of other people’s minds, which are concurrently directed at a common goal. We are able to do things together that only succeed because we do them together. A debate exists in analytic social ontology over the existence of “we-intentionality”, which I will not discuss here⁹.

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Suffice it to say that Searle (2010, p.44) posits as a necessary condition for social reality that, though “all human intentionality exists only in individual human brains”, within those individual brains we can have an intentionality that is directed at a contribution that will only succeed toward a common goal based on the assumption that others are also acting in that direction. Because human beings have the ability for collective intentionality they are able to collectively recognise, which is an essential part of Searle’s description of social reality.

Another ability that Searle considers human beings to need to be able to produce social reality is the ability to assign function. What is a function? For example, “an object will have a function imposed on it when the object is used for a certain purpose” (Searle, 2010, p.58). Or, in general terms, “a function is a cause that serves a purpose” where “functions are always intentionality-relative” (Searle, 2010, p.59 [emphasis in original]). This means simply that functions, according to Searle, are always relative to a directedness of a mind or of minds — crudely, what someone wants something to be used for. And the ability that human beings have to assign functions to objects and people is of great importance because:

The distinctive feature of human social reality, the way in which it differs from other forms of animal reality known to me, is that humans have the capacity to impose functions on objects and people where the objects and people cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure. (Searle, 2010, p.7)

When the ability to assign functions to objects and people is combined with the ability for collective intentionality, then we are able to assign functions in a way where an object or person can have a function divorced from any of the natural capacities of the object or person. With this we are almost at the creation of social reality. There is, however, a final ingredient to the manner in which human beings produce a level of reality that is their own, which is what makes for the infinite possibilities of different structures that can be produced: language.

Language is the thing that sets us apart from other animals, which Searle considers also have intentionality, collective intentionality, and the ability to impose function. Though these elements are necessary to build the kind of reality that we are
about to go through, the one that gives human institutional reality its distinctive quality is language. Now, as stated above, Searle has developed a long and complex philosophy of the logical structure of language, which he says is structured by “speech acts”. He outlines this briefly in *Making the Social World* and it is what has occupied much of his career. As with the logical structure of intentionality, however, I will not be detailing this account here — the reason being, once again, that I do not think that this account constrains the description of social reality presented and therefore can be understood without going into Searle’s theory of speech acts in detail\(^\text{10}\).

What is important for our purposes is to know what language adds to the picture of intentionality, collective intentionality, and the assignment function that make social reality possible. There are two elements that language brings that are important to state so that we can understand the account to follow. First, “in language [...] syntactical elements can be manipulated freely” (Searle, 2010, p.68). And second:

> [L]anguage has [...] such performative utterances as “I pronounce you husband and wife” and “I promise to come and see you.” In such cases language enables us to create reality by representing that reality as existing. (Searle, 2010, p.68)

Searle calls this type of speech act a “declaration”. First, then, language allows us to think and make known thoughts that would be impossible otherwise. It opens the boundaries of thought in ways that are almost unlimited. To illustrate the difference of intentionality without language Searle presents the following example:

> The dog might think that someone is approaching the door. But he cannot think the false thought, the door is approaching someone, and he cannot even distinguish the thought that someone is approaching the door from the thought that the door is being approached by someone. (Searle, 2010, p.68)

But human beings can think all of these things. We can, by using language, think in a way that, for all intents and purposes, is without boundaries. And we can also create reality just by declaring, with language, that something exists, as the performative statements

\(^{10}\) For a detailed account of speech act theory see Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).
cited above illustrate. Furthermore, Searle believes that when we have language we must do these things:

[O]nce you have a shared language you already have a social contract; indeed, you already have society. If by ‘state of nature’ is meant a state in which there are no human institutions, then for language-speaking animals, there is no such thing as a state of nature. (Searle, 2010, p.62 [emphasis in original])

Language necessarily produces social reality. We will now look at how social reality is produced.

My task here has not been to go into great detail about the building blocks of Searle’s theory. I believe that the image presented of what human beings are able to do is not particularly contentious and conforms to what most of us believe that we are able to do. In short, Searle says that human beings are able to direct their minds — alone and together — assign functions to objects and other human beings, and that, when language is added to the mix, the realm of possibilities for how the mind can be directed and what functions can be assigned opens up to become almost unlimited, to the point where new realities can and must be created.

These elements of Searle’s reasoning are where he is closest to the preoccupations of analytic social ontology. Searle discusses these, however, as a precursor to his account of social ontology. Because his background is in analytic philosophy, Searle considers that having a “truthful” and “logical” account of all of the elements of a theory is what philosophy is and therefore is required of any “serious” philosophical theory — it is no wonder he did not like Jacques Derrida11.

11 Searle has, on various occasions, rejected the thought of Derrida and others that he refers to as postmodernists in remarks of the following dismissive character: “Several ‘postmodernist’ literary theorists have argued that because all knowledge is socially constructed and subject to all the arbitrariness and will to power of any social construction, that therefore realism is somehow threatened. [...] Derrida, as far as I can tell, does not have an argument. He simply declares that there is nothing outside of texts (Il n’y a pas de ‘hors texte’). And in any case, in a subsequent polemical response to some objections of mine, he apparently takes it all back: he says that all he meant by the apparently spectacular declaration that there is nothing outside of texts is the banality that everything exists in some context or other! What is one to do then, in the face of an array of weak or even non-existent arguments for a conclusion that seems preposterous?” (Searle, 1995, pp.159-160)
Philosophy for analytic philosophers is providing logical, truthful explanations of things. Searle, therefore, dutifully provides logical accounts of the elements in question — intentionality, the assignment of function, and language. But it would be a mistake to think that these are the focus of his theory or what he considers to be the meat of his account of social ontology. These are the necessary conditions — the abilities that human beings must have — expressed in an analytic, logical style upon which his main theory can be presented. But let us be clear, all this amounts to is that the human beings presented to us by Searle are posited as thinking animals that are able to create realities through the use of language that did not previously exist and where this creative ability is constrained only by the limits of what can be expressed through language. Let us now see what this means for social reality.

### 2.3. Searle’s Social Ontology

Searle’s description of social ontology is one that is succinct and states, in no uncertain terms, the manner in which all social structures, which he refers to as institutional reality, are created. I will take him at his word that he means, and believes, this outline to be true. Though it is concise, it has many repercussions. In short, Searle’s description is that:

> [All of human institutional reality is created and maintained in existence by (representations that have the same logical form as) [status function] declarations, including the cases that are not speech acts in the explicit form of Declarations.](Searle, 2010, p.13 [emphasis in original])

What Searle calls a status function is just the manifestation of the ability to assign function — as discussed in part two of this chapter — where the function attributed to an object is unconstrained by the object’s “physical structure”. The “logical form” that he refers to is the way in which Searle puts into general terms the manner in which institutional reality is created by way of a “declaration” — the type of speech act referred to above of the type, “I now pronounce you man and wife”. It is the idea that this kind of thing can be expressed without saying those words exactly. Searle’s general formula, then, is the following:
The general form for the creation of status functions is this: We (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists. (Searle, 2010, p.93)

Simply, we can make something exist just by saying that it exists. However, originally, in *The Construction of Social Reality*, Searle believed that there was one major constraint to our ability to do this. Searle originally thought that there needed to be some brute fact, which he denoted X, to which we were able to attribute a new function. He now calls this just the simplest implementation of the ability of human beings to create social reality:

The basic form […] is this: We make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists in context C. […] The simplest implementation is where you simply impose a status function on a person or object […]: We make it the case by Declaration that object X now has the status function Y in C. (Searle, 2010, p.99)

In this case, Searle is referring to the kinds of status function declarations such as “this piece of paper is money”, whereby a piece of paper is given a function that it did not have previously. But what Searle had not realised, though now accepts, is that the creation of social structures by human beings does not require there to be an X term, some basic fact outside of human beings themselves, to rest on. He calls this “puzzling case” that of freestanding Y terms:

The most puzzling case is the case of the freestanding Y terms […]. The law is the following form: We make it the case by Declaration that for any x that satisfies a certain set of conditions p, x can create an entity with Y status function by Declaration in C. (Searle, 2010, p.99)

When Searle formulates this he is thinking of the creation of a corporation whereby, because of a “certain set of conditions” human beings can create a newly existing entity, seemingly out of thin air. The existence of freestanding Y terms means that human beings are able to create reality, unconstrained by what is around them. This, however, does not refute Searle’s desire to have a theory consistent with brute facts as long as the ability for human beings to use their consciousness, and consequently language, to this end is considered a brute fact.
I believe that, with a small reformulation of Searle’s above definitions, it is possible to very briefly encompass the crux of his entire conceptualisation of how social reality comes into being. In short, Searle’s idea is that all of human institutional reality is created and maintained in existence by status function declarations, or representations of the same type, where a status function declaration has the form: We make it the case by declaration that Y exists. And we can, conceivably, put anything in the place of Y and it will exist as long as there is a collective acceptance of that fact.

Searle makes many specifications about different types of social structures and the specifics of the various declarations in question that have allowed those to exist. That is not of interest to me in my task here because these differences do not, to my mind, have any serious effects on the dynamics of the existence of those entities. The general statement above determines the manner in which they exist. This means that their existence is due to, and dependent upon, human beings and their continual acceptance and expression of acceptance of their existence. It does not matter which social fact we are talking about, all of their existences depend, in the same way, on us. They are, ontologically, all the same.

For example, even in the case of institutional facts that are written down like, for example, laws, which Searle thinks gives the institution in question greater stability, they still will cease to exist if the people who collectively accept those laws all stop believing in their existence. I do concede, however that this might be a slower process. My point is that the various subtle differences do not matter on an ontological level, which is the level of analysis that I am studying in this thesis. On an ontological level, all institutional facts exist in the same way, as the product of the declarations of a single human being or a group of human beings. These facts are then maintained in existence by the collective acceptance by a social group of that fact, which is manifested by the members of the group’s continual expression that — by language or other means — their continual acceptance continues.

I would now like to come back to the issue of Searle’s change of heart regarding what ontology means for social science. This highlights the first inconsistency that I believe Searle has between his theory of ontology and his thoughts about how we can understand that same reality.

Let me be very clear. Searle says that there are two types of facts in the world, two types of reality: basic and nonbasic facts. And nowhere in Making the Social World is
a reality other than that of brute facts described that is not the social reality that is described above. So, it is only logical to assume that by nonbasic facts Searle means what he calls social/institutional facts, or in the terminology I prefer, social structures. This means that precisely two types of ontological structures exist in the world, brute facts, which exist in the brute manner of their name, and social structures, which exist in the way that is described above — created and maintained in existence by human beings. Therefore if something is not a brute fact, then it must be a social structure. If I am right it makes Searle's interlude about the ability to make discoveries in social science all the more puzzling.

Searle goes on a tangent at one point in Making the Social World to deal with a reproach he received from social scientists about his theory. It might seem obvious that Searle would receive criticism from social scientists seeing as he is essentially telling them that they have no idea what it is they are studying. But Searle seems somewhat surprised by this and therefore provides a defence of social science as currently practised. He understands the critique as follows:

Several commentators on [The Construction of Social Reality], especially social scientists, pointed out that there can be institutional facts of which the members of the community are unaware, and which can be discovered by social scientists. So, for example an economy might undergo a recession or go through the phases of the business cycle without the members of the community even having the concept of a recession or a business cycle. I have said in my account that institutional facts only exist insofar as they are represented as existing. But in these cases it appears that there are institutional facts that exist independently of anybody's representing them as existing, and can indeed be discovered independently of anybody's opinions. (Searle, 2010, p.116)

As an aside, Searle should most probably stop using examples from economics — the discipline among the social sciences that is perhaps the most bitterly divided — to try and underline the successes of social science. It makes those arguments an easy target. What makes it “[appear] that there are institutional facts that exist independently of anybody's representing them as existing” is just — for Searle does not provide any other explanation — that social scientists have told him that they have succeeded in
discovering independently existing institutional facts. It is very surprising to me that Searle seems willing to amend his painstakingly outlined description of social ontology based on the word of social scientists. I say this because nowhere in either *Making the Social World* or *The Construction of Social Reality* does Searle do any serious analysis of whether or not existing social science has been able to do such things and, moreover, his theory up until this point is all about a lack of understanding of the nature of what is being studied, which would indicate that perhaps social scientists may not know all that well what they are talking about.

Despite that, Searle takes this reproach very seriously and tries to make this challenge cohere with his social ontology. The way in which he then attempts to bring his vision of reality and the assertion that social science can independently discover existing facts into coexistence is as follows:

For people involved in the institution, the ground floor institutional facts can only exist insofar as they are represented as existing. But that set of institutional facts and the inherent representations will also satisfy other conditions that are not, or need not be, themselves represented. To take a trivial example, it has been discovered that in baseball, statistically, left-handed batters do better against right-handed pitchers, and right-handed batters do better against left-handed pitchers. This is not required by the rules of baseball; it is just something that happens. I propose to call these “third person fallout facts from institutional facts,” or more briefly, “fallouts” from institutional facts. They are “third personal,” because they need not be known by participants in the institutions. They can be stated from a third person, anthropological, point of view. (Searle, 2010, p.117)

What Searle is saying is that, though foundational social structures must exist in the way that he says, above, that *all* of social reality exists, these structures can then somehow produce independently existing phenomena that are not dependent on the collective acceptance of human beings. These “third person fallouts” then seem to behave with the same type of regularity as brute facts, which would make them measurable as Searle describes above. I hope that it is already clear that this does not make sense with regard to Searle’s theory of reality. In Searle’s theory of reality there are two types of facts,
brute facts and institutional facts, and unless Searle is saying that third person fallouts from institutional facts somehow become brute facts then unfortunately for him, in his description of reality, third person fallouts do not exist. Searle’s description of ontology does not include a process that would bring these third person fallouts into existence. The example that Searle gives to prove the existence of these “third person fallouts” even, to my mind, proves the opposite:

[T]he test [for if something is an institutional fact], as always, is, If people do not now believe it, and did not in the past believe it, would it still be true? In the case of a recession, if people didn’t believe that it was a recession, it would still be a recession. (Searle, 2010, p.117)

No it would not. If people had not invented the concept of a recession and had not collectively recognised it, if they had not determined and written down the highly debatable criteria for what a recession is, it would not exist. In any case, it is inconsistent with Searle’s theory of reality to say that it does. Searle’s theory of reality states that other than brute facts, there are social/institutional facts and social/institutional facts are created and maintained in existence by human beings. The only way to be consistent is to say that this includes recessions and batting averages. I am, here, for a second time, resoundingly rejecting this tangent of Searle’s theorising. All of social reality, according to Searle, is created and maintained in its existence by human beings.

2.4. A Dynamic and Changing Social Reality

What kind of a world do we live in then? I believe that, according to Searle, it is as follows. There are brute facts. These are things that exist principally because they are matter, and the way that they exist can be discovered by sciences such as physics, chemistry, and biology. I, and it seems to me Searle also, really know nothing of the complexities of these sciences or the entities they study. What we are really doing is just taking as given that there is a type of entity that exists that is not the one that we are talking about, so as to give the whole ensemble some kind of foundation.

Then there are institutional facts, social facts, and social structures — for our purposes here the terms are interchangeable. Searle provides us with a simple theory — with complex results — of how they exist. These structures exist because human beings
say that they do, other people accept this, and through saying and acting in ways that show that they accept this, the entity exists for a certain period of time. Once people stop believing in a structure's existence, it ceases to exist.

There are no constraints, except perhaps the limits of our language at a period of time, to what it is possible to create and therefore it is impossible to determine what kinds of entities will be created. The creation of structures, however, is a necessarily occurring phenomenon because the declarative form of language, for Searle, is an inherent part of language. The second a group of human beings have a language; they have social reality. I have rejected Searle's idea that this reality can then produce a side reality that functions independently of this whole framework.

If social reality is built in this way and all of its structures, without exception, exist only on the fragile beliefs of society's participants, it does not seem particularly contentious to say that this kind of reality must be quite unstable. Moreover, if the continued existence of structures is dependent upon the continued recognition of human beings, it seems reasonable to assume that some of the human beings acting or speaking in ways to reproduce the structure might not entirely understand what they are doing, which would make their actions or declarations modify the structure somewhat. I do not think it is unreasonable to assume that this kind of transformative maintenance would happen an awful lot. This would mean that structures are constantly changing and, at the same time, are unstable and able to disappear if the group were to choose it, or to simply forget.

The emerging picture is of a reality that is constantly producing new structures, in which those people producing the structures are only more or less conscious that they are doing so, and perhaps not at all. One does not need to understand that they are reproducing the institution of money to go and buy a newspaper. In addition to this constant creation, there is a constant process of maintenance or recreation that is conducted with the same mix of conscious and unconscious actions by virtue of which existing structures are constantly changing. Social reality is a dynamic process. It, if we are to understand Searle's theory in a consistent manner, is constantly changing and unstable. Let us now turn to Searle's theories of power and political power — a social structure — and see how it lines up with this reality.
3.1. Searle’s Theory of Power

In this chapter, I will begin by explaining what Searle tells us about power, first in general and then in its political form. After that, I will detail what I believe Searle’s description of social reality, which I outlined in chapter two, tells us about the ontologies of power and political power. Finally, I will look at what differences exist between these two accounts. That is, what differences exist between theory and ontology? The aim here is to see to what extent Searle’s understanding of power and political power respects and corresponds to his vision of social reality.

Searle presents this theory of power in two parts. First, Searle provides a brief outline of what he considers power, in general, to be. Though he states, “[i]t is not my aim to offer a general theory of power”, Searle (2010, p.145) does provide a general definition of the notion in the form of criteria phenomena must fulfil to be considered as “power”. Moreover, to demonstrate that his definition is, in fact, generally applicable, he uses the example of Foucauldian bio-power to show that even a wide-ranging concept of power such as Foucault’s can fit his identified criteria.

Second, Searle turns to the case of political power and to the paradoxical nature, as he believes it to be, of this sub-phenomenon. Once again, Searle provides a set of defining criteria that a phenomenon must fulfil to be considered to be “political power”. However, in this case, certain defining criteria prove contradictory, hence the paradox. I will analyse Searle’s description of the particularities of political power in the second part of this chapter. First, let us look at what power is, according to Searle.

Searle chooses to define power by looking at common or “paradigmatic” uses of the term. His aim is to see what similarities we might logically be able to find between such uses. Simply, Searle’s approach is to observe how the word “power” is generally used in English. The idea is that whatever is found to overlap between various paradigmatic uses of the term must be the definition of power. To start, then, Searle chooses examples that demonstrate that the word power is not exclusively used to refer to social phenomena:
[P]ower [...] is not confined to relationships between human beings. In the same literal sense in which the president of the United States has certain powers defined by the Constitution, my car engine has a certain amount of power measured as horsepower. There is no pun involved here. The notion of power is the notion of a *capacity*, and for that reason, a power may exist without ever being used or exercised. (Searle, 2010, p.145 [emphasis in original])

The first result of this comparative approach is that power, across its social and brute manifestations, refers to “a capacity, or ability” (Searle, 2010, p.146). A car has a certain amount of horsepower whether or not the speeds that this allows are ever reached. In the same way, the president of the United States has a certain number of abilities that exist, written in law, whether or not he is ever brought to exercise them. The common ground indicates that power is not defined by its exercise but rather in being a capacity.

Searle then turns to the question of exclusively social power, which is his real interest, and provides a definition of what he believes to be the general case of this phenomenon. It is perhaps important to note here that, though Searle’s method of analysis is ostensibly comparing common usages of the term “power”, he does not stick to this with any great rigour. Searle’s definition of social power is the following:

[S]ocial power ascriptions [...] describe relations between people and institutions and describe the power holders as having certain powers and not others. (Searle, 2010, p.146)

As for the above social and brute comparison, social power is understood by Searle, at first, to be the concept that a person or a group has a certain number of capacities that others do not. The paradigmatic example, according to Searle, of this kind of power is:

[T]he ability of an agent of power to get subjects to do what the agent wants them to do whether the subjects want to do so or not. In general, the *agent* of power can get what he or she wants, regardless of whether the *subject* of power wants the same thing. (Searle, 2010, p.147 [emphasis in original])
Power — in this formulation of Searle's definition — is a capacity that exists whether or not it is exercised. Moreover, in its social manifestation it exists because a person or group has the capacity to get other people or groups to do things, whether they want to or not. However, Searle (2010, p.146) also states, “power is manifest in its exercise”. Though power is defined, in this first instance, as a capacity that exists regardless of whether or not it is exercised, this does not diminish, to Searle’s mind, the importance of its use. This is the first problem that I identify with Searle’s reasoning. When he turns to the phenomenon of social power, it turns out that he considers the exercise of power to be, in fact, very important.

The problem Searle finds is that there are contexts in which he believes we can observe that people have been able to get others to do things whether they wanted to or not — as he has defined social power above — but where he would not call what the person has, or is doing, power. The problem is a phenomenon that Searle refers to as influence:

Influence is generally regarded as a species of power and indeed it often is a kind of power. But not all cases of exerting influence are necessarily cases of exercising power. For example, John Dewey has a huge influence on education in the United States, but most of the actual power was exercised by school boards and local governments, who changed educational requirements because they were influenced by Dewey. (Searle, 2010, p.148)

The bind Searle gets into is that he finds himself presented with a series of concepts that — though they are referred to with the same word — are not particularly simple to reconcile. On the one hand, as with the examples of cars and the president, power is defined as a capacity and exists whether it is used or not. However, on the other, when Searle looks exclusively at the social cases that are his main interest, he finds that social power is the ability of an agent to get subjects to do something whether they want to or not. But, as Searle finds with the case of influence, this kind of phenomenon can occur whether or not the agent of power is aware that he is doing this. For Searle, however, this is not power. It becomes power only when entities — human beings or groups of human beings — that are conscious of what they are doing exercise the ability to get others to do something, whether they want to or not. In the case of social power, Searle’s
analysis eventually concludes that the intentional exercise of power is, in fact, a defining characteristic, which would contradict his original definition. All the same, Searle adds the requirement of intentional exercise to his definition of social power in the following general terms:

X has power over Y if and only if X is able intentionally to get Y to behave in a certain way with respect to action A whether or not Y wants to behave that way. (Searle, 2010, p.148 [emphasis in original])

Searle does not address, nor does he solve, the issue of whether adding the exercise of power as a defining feature contradicts his own earlier definition. However, what I think is clear is that, notwithstanding the presidential example cited above, when Searle conceptualises power in its social manifestation, its intentional exercise is very much a defining characteristic. Therefore, for our purposes — understanding Searle’s theory of the social phenomenon of political power — we will retain this latter conceptualisation, which Searle puts forward as follows:

The core notion of power is that A has power over S with respect to action B if and only if A can intentionally get S to do what A wants regarding B, whether S wants to do it or not. (Searle, 2010, p.151)

From this general definition of social power, Searle proposes two constraining characteristics that he claims must be present for a phenomenon to be classified as power. The first is the concept of the intentional exercise of power as discussed above. He calls this “the intentionality constraint” (Searle, 2010, p.151):

The concept of power is logically tied to the concept of the intentional exercise of power. [...] The specification of the exercise of power therefore requires a specification of the intentional content of that exercise. (Searle, 2010, p.151)

To this, Searle adds what he calls “the exactness constraint” (Searle, 2010, p.152). This is perhaps a more contentious defining constraint and means that where there is power:
[O]ne should be able to say, who exactly has power over exactly whom to get them to do exactly what? (Searle, 2010, p.152)

In summary, according to Searle, for a phenomenon to be defined as power it must fulfil two criteria. First, an agent with power must be observed to intentionally exercise their ability to get someone to do something, whether or not the subject wants to. Second, we need to be able to point to who the agent with power is, who the subjects of that power are, and what exactly the agent wants, and is getting the subjects, to do.

To show that these defining criteria can account for a wide range of power phenomena, Searle takes the example of Foucault’s concept of bio-power. As he states it, he wants to know:

[W]hether conceptions like [Foucault’s] can be made intellectually respectable to the extent that they can conform to the exactness constraint and intentionality constraint. (Searle, 2010, pp.154-155)

Searle bases his understanding of Foucault on a volume of the Essential Works of Foucault named Power (see Foucault et al., 1997; Foucault and Faubion, 2000). This volume brings together extracts from Foucault’s written works as well as interviews. I will not, in this thesis, delve into Foucault’s work or the wider Foucauldian literature. I will simply look at how Searle uses his understanding of Foucault’s concept to strengthen his own conceptualisation of the notion of power12. Searle summarizes his understanding of Foucault’s theory as follows:

On [Foucault's] view, bio-power is pervasive throughout society. [...] It is a matter of the achievement of control over the bodies of human beings by subjecting them to the normalizing practices of society. Educational institutions, parents, prisons, hospitals and health care techniques, the practices of the religious confessional, and psychoanalysis — along with lots of other practices and institutions — all have the effect of producing a certain kind of normalization that

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12 For more on Foucault, the original versions of the majority of the texts presented in Power can be found in Dits et Écrits (Foucault, 1994; see also Farge and Foucault, 1982).
creates human subjects who can be administered. (Searle, 2010, pp.152-153 [emphasis in original])

For Searle, the types of pervasive societal pressures that Foucault describes are none other than the type of power that is exercised by the “Background” — in this case this term is used to collectively refer to “the Background” and “the Network”, which I defined in part two of chapter two. According to Searle, this catchall term — which refers to the varied types of social contexts in which we act — observably exercises a certain power over individuals as they act, make choices, and live their lives. As Searle (2010, p.156) puts it, “[s]ocial pressures can be a form of power”. But can they fit the two defining criteria of power that he has posited? Searle’s definition of Background power is the following:

The basic concept of Background power is that there is a set of Background presuppositions, attitudes, dispositions, capacities, and practices of any community that set normative constraints on the members of that community in such a way that violations of those constraints are subject to the negative imposition of sanctions by any member of the community. (Searle, 2010, p.160 [emphasis in original])

Let us be clear about what Searle is talking about here. It is simply the fact that, when one lives in a society, one has the feeling that there are a certain number of unwritten rules that must be more or less adhered to if one does not want to be shunned on some level by other members of that society. For example, this could be one important reason why people do not spend much time picking their noses in public, despite this activity being generally considered enjoyable.

There is an endless list of these types of pressure that everyone can surely think of. What is important is that we can generally agree that these kinds of pressures exist and that, if we were to transgress one of these unwritten rules, we feel there would be some kind of backlash from the people around us. But how can this kind of pressure conform to the intentionality and the exactness constraint and therefore be defined as power? Searle’s answer for the intentionality constraint is:
The exercise of Background power, like criminal law, extends the intentionality constraint from events to standing Directives. The simplest forms of the intentionality constraint, the paradigmatic cases, are events — the president issues a directive, the general orders his troops to advance — but in the case of Background power, like the criminal law, we have a standing power and a standing intentional content. The intentional content is not just “Conform on this occasion”; it is “Conform!” (Searle, 2010, p.158)

Searle’s argument here might seem somewhat confusing. To clarify, he is saying that Background power fits the intentionality constraint because the directive — the order, or the social pressure, such as the rule that you should not pick your nose in public — exists in the same way as the rule of law, in that it is inscribed in some perennial manner into our society. However, unlike the rule of law — where the standing directive is written down and the intentional exercise is in the hands of the various officials of the justice system — for Searle, in the case of Background power, the intentional exercise comes from society, which apparently holds a set of enduring rules that act upon us. This seems to me like a somewhat difficult argument to accept. According to Searle, power must be tied to its intentional exercise. But, also according to Searle, society as a whole does not have the capacity for intentionality:

Famously, Margaret Thatcher said society does not exist [...]. [T]here is something right about what she is saying, and that is that “society” does not name a form of collective intentionality. (Searle, 2010, p.156)

Searle does not resolve this inconsistency in his reasoning. And this is not the last difficulty he will encounter while trying to force Background power to fit his criteria. Searle’s answer for the exactness constraint, then, is:

[I]n these cases anybody can exercise power over anybody” (Searle, 2010, p.158 [emphasis in original]).

What is the point of having an exactness constraint that asks for us to be able to pinpoint who has what kind of power over whom if the answer “anybody over anybody” is
sufficient? I do not accept that this fulfils the criterion of exactness. In fact, Searle’s attempt to make Background power fit his constraining criteria serves only to highlight the problems with defining power as he has above. I will go into more detail about why his approach to definition is a fundamental methodological issue in the fourth section of this chapter. Here, I will simply state that I believe Searle fails to explain how bio-power — or, in his words, Background power — corresponds to his general definition of power.

In summary, let us take Searle’s general definition of power to be the following: the situation where an individual or group is able to get another individual or group to do something whether or not they want to do it. Furthermore, Searle adds that, for power to exist, we must be able to identify two things. First, the action — in very general terms — of the person or group, intentionally exercised, that has made the other person or group do the thing they did not want to do. Second, what group or person exactly has power, what group or person is subjected to that power, and what, when exercised, the holder of power is able to make the other person or group do. How does this definition fit when we try and look at the more specific case of political power?

3.2. Searle’s Paradox of Political Power

What Searle means when he says “political power” is the power exercised by a government or the state. He uses these terms interchangeably to refer to the “institutional structure” of “national government” (Searle, 2010, p.161). For Searle, this institutional structure is unlike any other:

[G]overnment [...] is not just another institution. There is a sense in which most organized societies the government is the ultimate institutional structure. (Searle, 2010, p.161 [emphasis in original])

What sense this is he does not specify. What he does outline — which forms the basis for his explanation of the nature of political power — is that he believes the power exercised by governments is paradoxical:

The paradox of government could be put as follows: governmental power is a system of status functions and thus rests on collective recognition or acceptance,
but the collective recognition or acceptance, though typically not itself based on violence, can continue to function only if there is a permanent threat of violence in the form of the military and the police. Legitimation is crucial for the functioning of government because political power requires some degree of acceptance. But where government is concerned, legitimation by itself is never enough. Though military and police power are different from political power, in general there is no such thing as government, no such thing as political power, without police power and military power. (Searle, 2010, p.163)

The paradox is that governmental power is what Searle calls deontic power — the type of power associated with rights and obligations. For Searle (2010, p.147), “deontic powers [...] involve getting people to do things without using force”. This type of power provides its subjects with reasons for doing things that are not responses to threats of violence. However, Searle observes that government seems to need institutions that threaten the use of force, such as the military and the police, to incite the public to respect the kinds of rules it imposes. How can this be so if it contradicts Searle’s definition of deontic powers, which he considers political power to be?

Searle (2010, p.164) sets out his general explanation of political power in a set of “essential points” that I will now examine, in turn, in the hope of finding an explanation for this paradox.

1. All political power is a matter of status functions, and for that reason all political power is deontic power. (Searle, 2010, p.164)

Searle’s starting point is consistent with his theory of reality. Political power — being a social/institutional structure — is the product of status functions. And the type of power that Searle generally associates with status functions, and therefore with political power, as identified above, is deontic power — power based on providing subjects with desire independent reasons for action.

2. Because all political power is a matter of status functions, all political power, though exercised from above, comes from below. (Searle, 2010, p.165)
This point simply restates point number one. In case we had forgotten the process by which institutional reality is created — through the declaration and then the collective recognition of its existence — Searle kindly reminds us. Therefore political power, which Searle considers to be created this way, comes from that process — in his terms, from below — and not from a pre-existing structure that imposes itself on its people — which Searle would refer to as “from above”.

3. Even though the individual is the source of all political power, by his or her ability to engage in collective intentionality, the individual, typically, feels powerless. (Searle, 2010, p.166)

This feeling of powerlessness before structures that we have created does not seem to be an uncommon feature of social reality. I would argue that this is the same with structures such as money, gender and many others. Because the process of creating and maintaining these structures in existence is one that we do both consciously and unconsciously in the context Searle calls the Background, this seems like a normal feature of social reality.

4. The system of political status functions works at least in part because recognised deontic powers provide desire-independent reasons for action. (Searle, 2010, p.167)

This, also, is not unique to political power and is a facet of all institutional reality as Searle has defined it. I contend that these first 4 essential points about political power are contained in the much simpler phrase: political power is a social structure.

5. It is a consequence of the analysis so far that there is a distinction between political power in general and political leadership as a special ability. (Searle, 2010, p.169)

I do not understand why Searle makes this point. What he explains is that political power is a separate entity to political leadership. This makes sense if we understand political power to be a social structure of the sort that Searle believes makes up
institutional reality. Political leadership is a manner in which a human being can act. Political power is a social structure. There is a clear distinction between the two.

6. Because political powers are matters of status functions, they are, in large part, linguistically constituted. (Searle, 2010, p.169)

Once again, this is just saying that political power has a feature of an institutional structure, which, as it has already been stated, political power is.

7. In order for a society to have a political reality in our sense, it needs several other distinguishing features: first, a distinction between the public and the private sphere with the political as part of the public sphere; second the existence of nonviolent group conflicts; and third, the group conflicts must be over social goods within a structure of deontology. (Searle, 2010, p.170)

This is a logical jump. From saying that political power is an institutional/social structure, Searle asserts that, for political entities to exist, they must necessarily be in a context that fits a set of strict features. There is no real explanation as to why this is claimed other than to say that, as Searle observes, these are the kinds of features that political reality currently seems to have. These criteria do not logically follow from the previous six points and, therefore, seem to come out of nowhere. Moreover, Searle’s jump to a set of strict defining criteria can be — as I will argue in part four of this chapter — interpreted to contradict his theory of social reality.

8. A monopoly on armed violence is an essential presupposition of government. (Searle, 2010, p.171)

Finally, we return to the original paradox. But still there is no explanation as to how to reconcile this issue. Furthermore, as above, there is no reason given for why a monopoly on violence is posited as an essential element other than the fact that it seems that this is
currently generally the case. Searle does not resolve what he considers to be the paradox of political power.

The point that I have sought to highlight here is that Searle makes a jump to classical kind of definition of political power that does not follow from his starting point of talking about the socially constructed nature of power. There is no logical link between these two parts of his reasoning. And, in the end, the result is a more or less unjustified definition of political power that boils down to: power backed by the threat of violence. I will discuss the problems that this poses in part four of this chapter.

In summary, Searle believes that political power is an institutional structure, created as he believes all institutional reality is created and maintained: by the declaration by a member or members of a society and the ensuing collective acceptance by the other members of that society. This carries a set of ontological features: that the existence of political power is dependent on the continued collective recognition of the group; that language is important to its existence; that its existence comes from people, etc. To this, however, Searle adds, with little explanation as to why, that political power must be backed by the force of the military and the police in a context that he calls “political reality” — which has its own set of unexplained defining criteria.

There we have it: Searle’s theory of political power. I will now turn to comparing Searle’s explanation of power, political power, and Searle’s vision of social ontology that I outlined in chapter two. I will first explain what ontological characteristics I believe that, according to Searle’s theory, power and political power must have. Then I will outline what inconsistencies exist between his general ontology of institutional reality and his theories of power and political power.

3.3. The Ontology of Power

What is the ontology of power? Before I answer this question, it will be useful at this point in the thesis to clarify the manner in which I conceive of the difference between a theory of power, an ontology of power, and the relationship that ontology has to theoretical structures. My understanding is in large part based on the work of Lawson (1997, 2003), Dow (1998, 2012), and Marsh and Stoker (2010).

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13 Searle has a ninth essential point where he makes some statements about the features of democracies but I will not outline that here. This point moves away from the issue of political power at hand. For more see Searle (2010, pp.171-173)
As I conceive of it, the structure of a theory — which I would also refer to as a theory’s methodology — can be broken down into three coherent elements: a method, an epistemology, and an ontology. By a method, I mean the approach taken by a researcher to understanding or explaining their chosen phenomenon. By an epistemology, I mean a theory of knowledge implied by the way that a researcher has gone about trying to understand their chosen phenomenon. By an ontology, I mean the theory of existence implied by the epistemology and the method chosen by the researcher to understand their chosen phenomenon. Whether or not a proposed theory makes clear what its epistemological and ontological foundations are, all theories contain these and they can be inferred by observing a theory’s method — that is, the theory’s approach to understanding its given phenomenon.

This idea about the structure of theory is important because it strongly influences the way that I am using the term realism in the thesis and how I am now going to compare Searle’s description of ontology to his theory of political power. First, to restate how I understand realism, it is the idea that a theory’s implied ontology should correspond to a description of ontology that is deemed real. This makes sense if it is possible to infer a theory’s implied conceptualisation of ontology simply by looking at its surface propositions. If this is possible then, with an outline of a realist social ontology on hand, we should be able to compare and observe whether the theory that we are examining is realist or not. For our purposes the theory of ontology deemed realist is clear. Searle has provided that description for us. I assume that he would want his theory of political power to be consistent with his own description of reality.

I have already outlined what I understand Searle’s theory of political power to be. What I am going to do in this section is explain how power and political power exist in a manner that is consistent with Searle’s description of social reality. I will then conduct a comparison of my description of the ontology of power with Searle’s theory of power to see what discrepancies might arise.

To recap, Searle’s theory of ontology is that two types of ontological structures exist in the world, brute facts and social/institutional facts. Brute facts simply exist. Social/institutional facts are created through a process of human beings declaring that they exist and then by a group of human beings collectively accepting that this is the case. These facts continue to exist for as long as the group collectively accepting their existence continues to believe that they exist. This belief must also be continually
manifested through speech or actions that are logically similar to the original declaration. There are no restrictions to what can be created and accepted beyond perhaps the limit of available words. This picture of social reality means that social structures are inherently unstable, changing, and dynamic. New structures are constantly popping up and existing ones are constantly changing and disappearing.

What does this mean for power? Power of a social sort, whether it is political or other, is a social structure and therefore must be ontologically the same as all other social structures. It is important to state this clearly because in the way Searle speaks of power it is not always immediately clear that he also classifies it at a social structure. Searle seems to suggest at times that power, specifically deontic power, is a naturally occurring by-product of the creation of other social structures. He also refers to powers that are brute facts, such as in the example of the car, which are not of interest in this thesis. At others, however, he makes statements such as “[d]eontic powers are powers that exist only because they are recognized and accepted as existing” (Searle, 2010, p.88). For this reason, I want to be clear. As I understand Searle there are only brute facts and social structures. Social power is not a brute fact and therefore it must be a social structure with an ontology that is the same as all other social/institutional facts.

On an ontological level, we know therefore that power is something that is created by human beings through a logical process of declaration and exists only as long as people believe it exists. Furthermore, this power is constantly changing. This applies even for powers that may be written down since our interpretation of the words in laws, for example, are observably constantly changing.

Powers, like all other social structures, are inherently dynamic and ephemeral. This does not mean that they cannot result in very real and very serious consequences. It simply means that their existence, no matter how consequential it may seem at a given moment, is dependent upon the continuing belief of groups of human beings, which, as history shows, if often fleeting. Though the existence of a set of powers, or a set of structures, can go on forever — with some measure of change and dynamism — this continuing existence is never guaranteed.

This is what we know from Searle about power on an ontological level. I know that this might not seem like much but I believe that it is important to keep ontological statements to the most basic assertions. This is because the ontological level is only the most fundamental. Phenomena that, on the surface, look very different can all share the
same ontological structure. This shows by the fact that Searle’s conception of ontology splits the world into only two types of ontological structure — brute facts and social structures. The point here is that, if we are going to take an interest in ontology, I believe it is important to take the conclusions of an ontological theory seriously. And if we take the conclusions of Searle’s theory of ontology seriously then power is changing, it is dynamic, it is unstable, and it is inherently ephemeral. The question that I will aim to answer now is: does Searle’s theory of power respect this ontology?

3.4. Comparing Searle’s Theory of Power to Reality

Let us now compare Searle’s theories of power and political power with what Searle’s description of social reality tells us about the ontology of power, which I outlined in part three of this chapter. I hope to demonstrate here that there are inconsistencies between what Searle says about social ontology and what he says about power. In doing so, I seek to highlight the difficulties that social ontology can pose for political theory, in particular, and social theory in general — issues that I will discuss further in chapter four of this thesis. These problems arise from the fact that social ontology provides a philosophical foundation for social science and social theory. Once one describes what they believe the fabric of social reality is, it seems only logical that this should constrain their theorising of that same reality, no matter the difficulties that might arise.

Searle’s theory of power begins by stating that it is not a purely social phenomenon. Therefore, in our attempts to define it, we should look not only at a social context in which this word is used but also at an instance in which the word power is referring to a brute fact. The examples chosen by Searle are, respectively, the powers of the president of the United States and the power of a car, as measured in horsepower. This starting point demonstrates that Searle’s description of ontology is not a top priority for him when setting out to understand this phenomenon. Rather, Searle’s method — comparing paradigmatic usages of the word to define — takes precedence. Choosing to begin this analysis by crossing the boundary between a brute fact and a social one, however, ignores the fundamental ontological difference between these types of phenomena, which Searle has spent the previous one hundred pages outlining.

It would seem that, when trying to determine what a phenomenon is, the nature of the phenomenon’s existence would be an important, fundamental, element to such research. Attempting to define a phenomenon by taking what is in common between
two phenomena that we know to be ontologically different, however, entirely ignores this as an important element in understanding. If anything, the one thing that we know from Searle’s above examples is that there are two ontologically distinct phenomena that are both referred to as power — one that is a brute fact and one that is a social structure. If we are to understand what one or the other is, it seems to me that a good place to start would be to restrict one’s analysis to types of phenomena that are of the same ontology, that at least exist in the same way. It does not make sense to search for a general definition of power over and above this ontological divide. These two phenomena — horsepower and presidential powers — are, according to Searle’s theory, ontologically, fundamentally different. There is no joint existence that could serve as a basis for a definition.

Indeed, as argued in part one of this chapter, the definition found by Searle through comparing these ontologically different phenomena becomes problematic the minute he focuses on the phenomenon that is of real interest to him: power that is created by human beings. Searle originally defines power as a capacity based on the fact that this seems to him to be what is in common between the power of a car and the powers of the president — over and above an ontological divide that he, himself, has asserted. However, quickly, when Searle turns to observing exclusively social manifestations of power, this capacity definition no longer seems to stick. I think the obvious reason for this is that it is erroneous to search for a common definition between two phenomena that we know to be ontologically different. Moreover, as an aside, one important thing that the study of social ontology, and the study of ontology more generally, can show us, is that just because a word is used to refer to two things, it does not mean that those things are the same.

Let us now look further at what happens when Searle turns his analysis to power in its exclusively social manifestations. Despite saying that he does not wish to do this, Searle provides, perhaps not a general theory of power, but definitely a general definition of social power, which I will refer to from now on simply as “power”. According to Searle, power is the ability of a person or group to get another person or group to do something whether they want to or not. For Searle, because there are other types of abilities, namely influence, that can achieve such goals, he also proposes two constraints that a phenomenon must fulfil to be truly identified as power. These constraints are that the exercise of power must be intentional and that an outside
observer must be able to identify who has the power, who it is directed toward, and what the power is getting the subject to do.

With regard to Searle’s vision of social reality, this proposed definition is not fundamentally problematic. Whether or not there are inconsistencies with regard to his vision of social ontology depends on how the nature of the definition is understood. On the one hand, Searle’s definition provides a set of criteria that we can use to decide whether we should call a phenomenon that we are observing power, or not. This seems to me to be a useful process for clarifying what it is that we are talking about when we say “power”, which is, I believe, an important role for social theory and social science. However, there is an issue posed for his social ontology by the manner in which Searle presents this definition. He argues that this is what power is, that he has somehow discovered, through his analysis, the defining features of power. But we know that power, like all other social structures, is a constantly changing, moving, appearing and disappearing phenomenon. It is not fixed and therefore could not possibly fit a stringent definition such as the one proposed by Searle. His own description of social ontology makes it impossible for him to have discovered, through his analysis, what power is.

If we are to be consistent with Searle’s vision of social ontology then it must be understood that this theory of power simply suggests criteria by which we can define, in a consistent manner, a phenomenon that Searle names “power”. This theory is, in fact, a social structure like any other. And the process of creation is the same as for any social structure. In presenting his theory of power, Searle has declared that this process of definition exists and it will continue to do so for as long as a group believes, and demonstrates that they believe, that power is defined in this way.

If Searle is presenting his definition as a discovery of what power is, then this is inconsistent with what we know, according to Searle’s own description of ontology, power to be. If Searle is understood to be creating a new social structure — a theory — that we can use to consistently define observed phenomena according to a set of criteria as falling under a category that we name power, then, as long as this fact is recognised, this type of definition is consistent with Searle’s social ontology. According to his own vision of social ontology, Searle’s definition of power is a social structure like any other, with all of the same foibles.

However, Searle does indeed believes erroneously that he has discovered what power is and attempts to demonstrate this by explaining how Foucault’s notion of bio-
power, which Searle calls Background power, fits his definition. This provides a good opportunity, as promised in chapter two, to look at Searle’s notion of the Background in a little more detail. Once again, Searle’s theories of the Background and Background power take little to no direction from his description of social ontology.

To refresh our memories, the Background — referring, as Searle does in parts of *Making the Social World*, to both his notions of the Network and the Background — is that mesh of things — beliefs, desires, and abilities — that allows us to act and do the kinds of things that we may want to do. Searle’s favourite example is that, when someone wants to be able to drive their car to work, there is a plethora of things that they need, want, and are able to do that allows them to form that intention and then carry it out (Searle, 2010, p.31).

I believe "the Background" is an intentionally vague name. It is intentionally vague because it allows Searle to posit this collection of things as existing in some undefined manner outside of his theory of ontology. On the one hand, his example of driving shows that we need other elements to be able to do the kinds of activities that human beings do on a day-to-day basis. However, instead of analysing with any depth how it is that there varied elements might exist, Searle lumps them all in under the name “the Background”.

What, though, could these beliefs, desires, and abilities be if we think in terms of Searle’s description of social ontology? Searle’s social ontology, I repeat, only posits the existence of two types of structures: brute facts and social/institutional facts. For Searle, brute facts extend all the way to base consciousness, but, from language onward, we move into the realm of the social. Therefore, the kinds of things that make up the Background must be a part of, or linked in some way, to social reality.

Let us take the example of driving to work. The kinds of things that we need to know how to do to form this intention are, for example, being able to drive, knowing where work is, having a job, etc. The kinds of beliefs and desires are thinking work is important, wanting to go to work, wanting to get there quickly etc. It should be clear that the contents of the two previous sentences are all things that are of a social order.

The fact that we have jobs, that we want to go to work, that we do so by driving cars on a system of roads, that we are able to drive cars, and that this is attested to by us having driver’s licenses is all the result of us living in a socially constructed world where social structures such as jobs, cars, driver’s licenses, road rules, etc., exist. These
structures have all been created and all continue to exist as Searle describes all of institutional reality to exist.

The Background, therefore, has nothing at all mysterious to it, not if we believe that Searle has accurately described the nature of social reality. The Background is the simple fact that we live in a system of social structures that influence the ways in which we conduct our lives. When human beings create social structures they do not float benign above us. Social structures exercise a varying degree of influence over the way that we conduct our lives — constraining, and creating, possibilities. Though social structures are entirely dependent on us for their existence, they also exercise a power of conditioning that is seemingly undetermined by, and independent of, us.

Lawson, in an extract that I have already cited in chapter one, illustrates the way in which social structures have this influential effect on human beings:

When we come to act, the contents of previous acceptances, whether embedded in agreements, precedents or whatever, are given to us; and through our acting we both draw on them (whether or not we are explicitly aware of this) and also (if typically unintentionally) contribute not just to the reproduction of social structures but also to their transformation. (Lawson, 2012, p.373)

We do not act in a vacuum. We act in a context of social structures that create desires, beliefs, and abilities. And as Lawson states, when we act we draw on all of these things to be able to do the kinds of socially complex actions that are habitual to us all. Lawson adds here too what I have been arguing previously, which is that much of this influence on our actions is unknown to the actors and that, though we act within this context, and by our actions reproduce the social structures that make up our context, we are also continually transforming those same structures. This is the Background. It is not another special element. It is the context of conditioning pressure created by social reality. It is simply the experience of living and acting in a world that is made up of social structures.

What then of Background powers? For Searle these are pressures — distinct in some way from the general influence of the Background — that we feel, as members of a society, to conform to the various perceived rules that may or may not exist within a societal group. I concede that I, and I imagine most other people, have felt something at some point in their lives that they would refer to as social pressures. However, with
what we know of the ontology of the Background, how could this mesh of social structures exercise a pressure that would fit Searle's definition of power? The answer is they cannot. We know that all social structures have a certain power of conditioning over us human beings. But there is nothing in Searle's social ontology that makes it possible for a distinct influence of this sort to be exercised by what he calls the Background. I am not questioning that human beings experience a thing that could be referred to as social pressure. However, this feeling can be explained as just a type of response to the kind of general influence that all social structures exercise, more or less, over our lives.

As discussed in chapter two, Searle has a difficult time making his concept of Background power fit his general definition of power. I am asserting that this is because Searle's idea that Background power is some special type of phenomenon is not right. It cannot exist, according to his theory of social reality, in the distinct manner that he conceptualises. This pressure or influence is, ontologically speaking, a feature of all social structures and, therefore, there can be no distinction, according to Searle's description of social reality, between what he calls the Background and what he calls Background power.

Finally, we arrive at how Searle defines political power. Over and above his statements asserting that political power is a social structure, Searle defines this particular type of power as one that is backed by the force of the military and police, by the threat of violence. Furthermore, Searle adds that political power exists in a context he names “political reality”. Once again, as with power in general, what we have here is a proposed definition, which we could use to more or less consistently identify phenomena as political power. However, what we know of the ontology of political power is that it exists in the same way as all other social powers and all other social structures — it is socially constructed, dynamic, changing and ephemeral. It is ontologically indistinct from those other social structures. Therefore, as with power, it is not amenable to any kind of fixed definition.

This is the general issue that Searle's social ontology poses for the process of definition. Though an important role for social theory and social science is to propose definitions so that we can suggest intelligible categories from which we can analyse different social phenomena, ontologically speaking a definition of a social structure cannot be accurate. Searle's social ontology describes socially constructed phenomenon
such as political power as inherently dynamic and changing, which is not something that can be pinned down.

If we are to be consistent with Searle’s social ontology, then these definitions are new social structures. They are not discovering what power or political power is, but rather they are creating a definition that we can then use to put observed phenomena into boxes — named, in this case, power and political power. Each definition is a new social structure. It does not discover an old one. This is not made clear in *Making the Social World* and, rather, Searle’s analysis is presented in much the same way as a classical work of political philosophy, wherein it seems as though distinct phenomena exist in some essential way and are therefore able to be defined. Searle’s theories of power and political power are presented as though they were discoveries of what power and political power are.

This does not fit with what Searle’s ontology tells us about social structures. Power is just one type of a multitude of social structures that are ontologically indistinct. There is nothing in the ontology of power, according to Searle’s own vision of social reality, which makes it any different to any other social structure that one might be able to think of. If power or political power are conceptualised to exist in some distinct manner it is only because a new social structure — a definition — has been created wherein it is declared that a certain set of criteria must be fulfilled for a phenomenon to be called “power”.

Through this comparison, the problem of the whole process of definition and how it is conceptualised in relation to Searle’s description of ontology can be clearly seen. The kinds of phenomena that he is looking at — power and political power — do not exist in a distinct way, according to his own explanation of social ontology. All social structures, on an ontological level, are the same. Moreover, they are changing, appearing, and disappearing constantly. This fact, if it is taken to be right, must mean that there is no hope of truthfully identifying certain sub-types of social structure.

In the social realm such as Searle describes it, we cannot be correct in our theories of social reality, we are simply creating new structures of understanding that will exist for as long as there is a collective acceptance that these structures allow us to understand something. What political theorists, social scientists, and social theorists can do is invent concepts that we can then use in invented understandings of the invented world that surrounds us. Does this mean that realism and social ontology lead us down a
path where we can no longer hope to truly understand the social world around us? What does this mean for political theory?
4.1. The Problem With Realism

Realism, as outlined in part four of chapter one, is a term that is understood and used in a variety of ways. I have chosen to use it, in this thesis, in the manner that Tony Lawson explains its meaning in his 1997 book, *Economics and Reality*. This conceptualisation of the meaning of realism draws a direct and constraining link between the study of social ontology and the way in which we pursue political theory, social science, and social theory in general.

In short, realism, in this formulation, means that the methods employed by a theory — that is, any manner in which a theory goes about trying to understand its subject material — must presuppose an ontology that conforms to an account of ontology that is deemed real. I say *an* account of ontology because realism of this sort does not posit that one account of reality is right. The idea is, rather, that if we are to attempt to strive toward a level of realism in social theory then we must, first, do our best to describe what we believe the nature of social phenomena is — elaborate an account of social ontology — and, second, hold ourselves, when theorising social phenomena, to that reality.

My aim, in this thesis is, and previously has been, to see what kinds of results we might get, and the difficulties we might highlight, if we apply this requirement strictly to analysing social theories (see Slade-Caffarel, 2013). I believe the best way to do this — for it removes any arguments about whether or not a theorist believes in a certain vision of reality — is to conduct an internal comparison of one theorist’s thought. Searle is a good subject for this kind of analysis as he provides both a description of social ontology and theories of social phenomena — power, political power, and even human rights, though the latter will not be discussed here14.

In chapter three, I sought to highlight the kinds of inconsistencies that I believe to exist between Searle’s account of social ontology and the manner in which he attempts to define both the notion of power and the phenomenon of political power. If you say that reality is a certain way, then realism means is that it is unacceptable to theorise parts of that same reality in a manner that ignores, in large part, that description.

14 For more see Searle (2010, pp.174-198)
Indeed, I have accused Searle of ignoring the reality that he describes — his own account of social ontology — when trying to understand a part of that reality — his theories of power and political power.

That being said, I have found this same result — that is, a high level of inconsistency — every time I have conducted an internal comparison of the relationship between a theorist’s description of social ontology and the theories of social phenomena, or the methods for understanding social phenomena, proposed by those same theorists. I have argued in previous research that this is the case for Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, André Orléan, and even Tony Lawson (Slade-Caffarel, 2013). Searle’s case is just a further example of what I see as a general problem with realism of this sort.

First, I want to briefly restate here why realism of this sort, despite all the difficulties it poses, is a worthy pursuit. Then I will explain why the types of problems I have highlighted with in the work of John Searle speak to a larger fundamental issue with realism.

To recap, this argument for realism comes from — as I have already mentioned in parts two and four of chapter one — Tony Lawson’s reasoning with regard to the methodological issues presented by mainstream economics. The starting point is the assertion that there must be a problem with mainstream economics because its theoretical contributions are, in large part, “wrong or absurd” (Bhaskar, 2007, p.192). Lawson is not alone in this diagnosis. It is one that has been made in various forms over the course of the twentieth century — most notably perhaps by John Maynard Keynes and John Kenneth Galbraith, among many others. Moreover, it continues with renewed force today.

In part one of chapter two, I explained the manner in which Lawson asserts that the problem with mainstream economics — why it produces knowledge that does not render its subject matter intelligible — is that the ontology presupposed by the methods that it uses does not correspond, at all, to the reality of our existence, and therefore to the phenomena it is trying to explain. If this is the case, then a direct link has been drawn between the use of methods that presuppose an unrealistic vision of social ontology and the production of erroneous theoretical conclusions. The general idea, then, that I derive from this analysis is that the case of mainstream economics shows

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15 See Keynes (1936) and Galbraith (1952). For contemporary arguments see, for example, Généreux (2006), Keen (2011), Orléan (2011), Stilwell and Argyrous (2003).
that there will be a problem if social theory, in general, ignores ontology and, consequently, uses methods that are inappropriate for whatever subject matter is in question.

If this separation from reality poses such a problem in economics, I think it is only logical to assume that the same issues would arise in political theory, social science, and social theory in general. Therefore, it seems to be that there needs to be a way to keep social theorising in line with the reality it is trying to understand. The proposal of the type of realism that I am talking about here is that, because there has been very little agreement so far in the history of philosophy about the nature of reality, that we — as social theorists — should lay bare what we believe the nature of social reality to be — social ontology — and then try and hold ourselves to it.

In summary, the argument for realism is that when social theory employs research methods that presuppose ontologies that are different from reality as is it, then the resulting theories do not render their subject matter intelligible in the way that is desired. To produce better theory we need to try and keep our theorising as close to reality as possible. This poses the question: what is reality? And that is where social ontology comes in.

The problem with realism, as I hope was made quite clear in chapters two and three of this thesis, is that the picture of reality arrived at when a theorist attempts to outline a vision of social ontology can be one that seems very difficult to understand — even, perhaps, impossible. This is not an uncommon issue. Searle's picture of reality, I have argued in this thesis, is very close to Lawson's. Moreover, previously I have argued that Lawson's description is quite similar to arguments made about the nature of social-historical phenomena by Sartre (1943, 1960) and Castoriadis (1976), among others (Slade-Caffarel, 2013).

That type of description is one where the objects analysed in political theory, social science, and social theory in general — social structures — are dynamic, changing, appearing, disappearing, and altogether particularly difficult entities to capture in any kind of stable manner. The issue is, therefore, that this seems to run contrary to the entire aim of social theory, which is precisely to create bodies of knowledge — theories — that are, by definition, stable. What I mean here is that the type of reality that Searle and others have described is seemingly at odds with the aims of political theory, social science, and social theory.
What then of realism? How is realism to function if what it does is attempts to hold our theorising to an unattainable standard? Where is there to go from that point? This is the major problem that realism poses, as I see it. It seems as though realism, if founded on such a description of social ontology, would arrive at the necessary conclusion that social reality is of such a nature that it cannot be conceptualised in a manner that conforms to that reality.

What I would like to do in this chapter is to look first at two responses that have been made to this predicament. The first, for which I will look to the reasoning of Cornelius Castoriadis, contends that the arguments of realism — as I have presented them — are correct and, in fact, the problem lies with the manner in which we theorise — in the way we construct logical theoretical structures — and that what we need is a revolution in the way that we do social theory. The second argument, for which I will look to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, is to embrace that we cannot, by the nature of reality and the nature of theorising, ever truthfully capture the types of phenomena that we analyse in social theory. Rather, social theorising can only produce new social structures, which is a problem I have alluded to already in part four of chapter three. This second answer states that the knowledge of social theory can be nothing more than a social structure of the same nature as those it is trying to understand.

I will now analyse these responses in turn before proposing what I believe to be a more, for lack of a better word, pragmatic solution to these issues. My suggestion does not attempt to provide a general solution but instead looks at producing consistent normative judgements regarding the realism of theories in the aim of nudging the way we theorise closer to reality.

4.2. Incomprehensible Reality

Castoriadis, in the first volume of his mammoth *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, spends a substantial amount of time explaining why he believes that there has been so much difficulty experienced by all — even great philosophers — who have tried to understand social phenomena. The “social-historical” — as he refers to the radically contingent phenomena that I have been calling, in this thesis, social structures — is, for him, the great, unresolved challenge of philosophy and social theory. He argues that in the work of poorer thinkers, the issue of the constructed-contingent nature of social structures is simply ignored, but that in the thought of the greats — who are able to observe that
reality exists in this way — it creates a division between what they can see to be the case, and logic itself, which they use to think. For Castoriadis:

La vraie « borne historique » [...] aussi bien d’Aristote que de Marx est la question de l’institution. C’est l’impossibilité, pour la pensée héritée, de prendre en compte le social-historique comme mode d’être non réductible à ce qui est « connu » par ailleurs. Cette impossibilité n’apparaît pas chez les auteurs plats — qui effectivement « réduisent » le social-historique à autre chose (à la « nature », à la « structure », au « désir » etc.) Elle apparaît chez les grands — et précisément sous forme d’antinomie, de division interne de la pensée. Ainsi, elle trace la limite de la grande pensée grecque, comme celle de Hegel ou de Marx — et par là même, de la pensée politique héritée, conçue comme « théorie ». La question de l’institution et du social-historique devient limite de la pensée héritée, parce que et pour autant qu’elle est posée dans un horizon « purement théorique » ; parce que et pour autant que l’on veut rendre compte et raison de l’institution telle qu’elle est, et fonder en raison l’institution telle qu’elle « devrait » être. Mais la question de l’institution excède de loin la « théorie » ; penser l’institution telle quelle est, comme création social-historique, exige de briser le cadre logique-ontologique hérité [...]. (Castoriadis, 1978, p.411 [emphasis in original])

Castoriadis conceptualizes that western thought itself exists within a logical-ontological framework — referred to also as “traditional thought”, “inherited thought”, and “holist

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16 Translation: “The real “historical limit” [...] of Aristotle as well as Marx is the question of the institution. It is the impossibility of inherited thought to take into account the social-historical as a mode of being not reducible to that which is “known” from elsewhere. The impossibility does not make an appearance with dull authors — who effectively “reduce” the social-historical to something else (to “nature”, to “structure”, to “desire”, etc.). It appears with the great — and precisely under the form of the antinomy, of the internal division of thought. Thus is traces the limit of Greek thought, as that of Hegel and Marx, and the same way of inherited political thought conceived as theory. The questions of the institution and of the social-historical become the limits of inherited thought, because and insofar as they are posed within a horizon “purely theoretical,” because and insofar as one wants to give an account and a reason for the institution as it is, and to ground in reason what the institution “ought” to be. But the question of the institution by far exceeds “theory”; to think the institution such as it is — as social-historical creation — requires the smashing of inherited logic-ontology. (Castoriadis, 1978a, p.737)
logic” — that, because of the categories that it requires us to use to be able to think, presupposes an ontology that is inconsistent with social reality. In short, this framework forces us to ground our analyses in universalising categories. He explains that even though certain thinkers are able to observe social reality as it is — constructed, changing, appearing, disappearing — and have even been able to write such accounts, they are incapable, when theorising such phenomena, of avoiding falling into the traps that Castoriadis believes are set by the framework. He takes Marx and his conceptualization of the concept of labour as a good example of this:

Le paradoxe, l’antinomie de la pensée de Marx est que ce Travail qui modifie tout et se modifie constamment lui-même, est en même temps pensé sous la catégorie de la Substance/Essence, de ce qui subsiste inaltérable, qui peut « apparaître » sous telle forme ou prendre telle « expression » [...] mais, en lui-même ne se modifie pas, ne s’altère pas, subsiste comme fondement immuable des attributs et des déterminations changeantes. (Castoriadis, 1978, p.345 [emphasis in original])

The argument here is that, though Marx speaks of labour as being a social relation and historically specific — constantly changing and having a transformative effect on other structures — when the time comes for him to theorise the relationship between labour and the goods it produces, Marx invents the concept of abstract labour — an unchanging essential form of this concept. Marx does this to give a measurable foundation to his labour theory of value. But, as Castoriadis points out, this seems to contradict the otherwise social-historical description that is given of labour. How can labour, at once, be both a constantly changing, social relationship and an essential, unchanging entity? Castoriadis’ explanation for this theoretical inconsistency is precisely that Marx was able to observe how labour existed but that, because he was forced to reason in a logical-

17 Translation: “The paradox, the antinomy of Marx’s thought, lies in the fact that Labour, which constantly modifies everything, including itself, is at the same time conceived of under the category of Substance/Essence, of that which can “appear” under a given form or take on a given “expression” [...] but which, in itself, does not modify itself, does not alter, and subsists as the immutable foundation of changing attributes and determinations.” (Castoriadis, 1984, p.274)
ontological framework that does not allow for the conceptualisation of such an entity, he was forced, at the point of theorising, to resort to a universalising conceptualisation of notion of labour — to a stable unchanging definition. Castoriadis argues that this is, in part, the result of the fact that the only attempts that have ever been made to understand social phenomena have tried to apply the types of logical structures that work well when we try to understand natural phenomena. For him, this is problematic because these methods are simply inappropriate for social material:

The idea here is not that all has been mathematized. Rather, the categories of logic that exist in mathematics have been generalised to form the basis of logic itself, regardless of where it is applied. Analytic philosophy is a good example of this with the way it represents language in formal logical notation. Ideas such as the need to formalise concepts, to work out the order of phenomena, which phenomena are equal to others, what the function of phenomena are, etc., all of these, according to Castoriadis are derived from mathematical reason and simply do not apply to the analysis of social phenomena:

On tente ainsi, dans le domaine anthropologique, des pseudo-formalisations, par simple transposition ou décalque des types de formalisation qui semblent avoir

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18 My translation: "we wanted to mathematize and formalise without asking ourselves if the conditions were right for formalisation, and what kind. It is not only the theory of measures and classical analysis that reveal themselves unable to capture social phenomena, but also much more primitive categories of mathematics — order, equivalence, function, and, finally, even the category of a whole — miss what is essential"
réussi ailleurs, sans s’interroger sur la légitimité de telles transpostions [...]. (Castoriadis, 1978, pp.265-266)19

However:

[Les catégories centrales de la logique ensembliste s’effondrent au contact du social-historique. (Castoriadis, 1978, p.275)]20

Castoriadis’ idea is that we are stuck in a way of thinking that forces us to define, categorise, and compare the entities in our theories in such a way that they are necessarily conceptualised in a manner that is at odds with social reality as both he and, as I am arguing throughout this work, Searle understand and believe it to exist. The explanation, therefore, for why thinkers encounter such difficulty — as I have argued Searle does — in trying to respect their visions of social reality when it comes to actually theorising a social phenomenon, would be that logic itself is not appropriate for theorising such phenomena.

This reasoning therefore provides us with an answer to the question of why realism of the sort presented in this thesis is so problematic. But where does that leave us? Where can we go from here? Castoriadis’ answer is that, unfortunately, as long as we continue to think within the identified inherited logical-ontological framework, we will never be able to understand social-historical phenomena. Therefore:

Nous pensons […] qu’une nouvelle logique peut et doit être élaborée. (Castoriadis, 1978, p.276)21

Castoriadis’ indication as to how to begin to develop such a new logic is to move away from theory as traditionally developed and for thought in social theory to become

19 My translation: “What has been attempted, in the anthropological domain, are pseudo-formalisations, by simply transposing types of formalisation that have been successful elsewhere, without questioning the legitimacy of such transpositions [...].”

20 My translation: “The categories of holist […] logic fall apart when they come into contact with the social-historical.”

21 My translation: “We think […] that a new logic can and must be elaborated.”
intimately entwined with political action. I am not, however, going to examine Castoriadis’ proposal for how to think here\textsuperscript{22}.

Whatever the suggestion for a new way to understand social reality might be, the creation of a new logic, which sounds to me like he is suggesting a complete revolution in the way that we think, is an enormous and quite possibly unachievable undertaking. What is important to understand in this argument is that it is asserting that, as things stand with the tools of comprehension available to us, social reality is incomprehensible. For it to be possible to understand, we would need to change the way that we think. This would explain why the differences between Searle’s theories of power and his account of social ontology exist. It is not, however, an altogether encouraging diagnosis.

Let us look now at an explanation that posits an epistemology — a philosophy of how knowledge is produced and exists — that tries to be consistent with the type of social ontology that Searle has described. What might a new conceptualisation of knowledge mean for political theory, social science, and social theory in general?

4.3. Constructing Theories

Though I am in agreement with Castoriadis that the nature of social material renders it unsuitable for conceptualisation via hard definition or categorisation, as I stated in part four of chapter three, I do not consider Searle’s proposed definitions for the terms power and political power as being fundamentally inconsistent with realism. As long as it is recognised that what is being done is not identifying the fundamental characteristics of a phenomenon but, rather, that through the act of presenting a theory, one is creating a new social structure — of the same nature as the structures it is trying to understand — then I have no problem, as far as realism goes, with this. A definition of power, or any other kind of definition for that matter, if we are to respect Searle’s social ontology, is in fact a social construct — a social structure. In the case of a definition of power, this social structure sets out a series of rules that a phenomenon needs to comply with for it to be designated as “power”. This definition will then exist for as long as people believe that it exists. Understood in this way, definitions of the sort Searle proposes for power and political power are consistent with Searle’s social ontology.

\textsuperscript{22} For more see Castoriadis (1976).
An epistemology — a theory of knowledge — that is consistent with Searle's social ontology understands that “knowledge must be recognised as a produced means of production [...] and [...] [k]nowledge is a social product” (Lawson, 1997, p.25). This epistemology generalises to all knowledge the argument that has been made throughout this thesis with regard, in particular, to definition. All knowledge of social phenomena, because human beings construct it, must be of the same nature — it must have the same ontology — as all other social products, that is, all social structures. Is it still then possible to understand something about the social world when our understandings of it just create more of the same phenomena that we were originally trying to render intelligible?

For Jean-Paul Sartre, we cannot in fact “Know” — Sartre capitalises knowledge to refer to the type of certain knowledge that we might associate with the natural sciences — the phenomena of social reality, which he refers to as human reality. The type of knowledge created of social phenomena is different to the formal Knowledge of the natural sciences and is indeed, according to him, of the same nature as the social reality it is trying to understand. For Sartre, knowledge of social phenomena therefore exists in an intertwined — back and forth — relationship with the reality that it is trying to understand:

[H]uman reality eludes direct knowledge to the degree that it makes it-self. The determinations of the person appear only in a society which constantly constructs itself [...] — all of this in a never ceasing movement of totalisation. But these determinations are themselves sustained, internalised and lived [...] by a personal project which has two fundamental characteristics: first, it cannot under any circumstances be defined by concepts; second, as a human project it is always comprehensible [...]. To make this comprehension explicit does not by any means lead us to discover abstract notions, the combination of which could put the comprehension back into conceptual Knowledge; rather it reproduces the dialectic movement which starts from simple existing givens and is raised to signify activity. This comprehension, which is not distinguished from praxis, is at once both immediate existence (since it is produced as the movement of action) and the foundation of an indirect knowing of existence (since it comprehends the existence of the other). (Sartre, 1968, pp.170-171 [emphasis in original])
What Sartre is saying here is that, in the constantly transforming, appearing, and disappearing reality of human existence, certain conceptual knowledge of social objects is impossible. There is, however, a type of understanding to be had of social phenomena, which Sartre calls “comprehension”. Comprehension is the type of knowledge that I have been referring to — with regard to definition — in this chapter and in part four of chapter three: knowledge of the same nature as the phenomena it is trying to understand. Comprehension is knowledge that exists as all social structures do — constructed, transforming, appearing, and disappearing.

According to Sartre, comprehension that is explicitly stated — in the way that Searle might outline the definitions that he has proposed of power and political power — is, therefore, no different, at least ontologically, to any passing understanding that one might have of what is going on in their life. All understandings of social phenomena are ontologically the same. Moreover, they are ontologically identical to the other constructions found within society. Therefore, comprehension becomes just another addition to the mesh of structures within “a society which constantly constructs itself”. Sartre describes the dynamic relationship between comprehension and the rest of social reality as follows:

The movement of comprehension is simultaneously progressive (towards the objective result) and regressive (I go back towards the original condition). This comprehension is nothing other than my real life [...]. (Sartre, 1968, p.155)

The relationship between the rest of social reality and the knowledge produced about, and within, is a continual back and forth of constant movement as part of a never-ending dynamic process. It is of a similar changing and dynamic nature to the existence of any particular social structure as described by Searle’s social ontology. Therefore, certain knowledge of social structures is unattainable. We could build more formal types of theories, but they would not — other than in appearance — be any more accurate, or provide any more trustworthy a conceptual apparatus, according to Sartre, than any other understanding.

This is where what I have been arguing about definition differs somewhat from Sartre’s general argument with regard to knowledge. According to Searle’s theory of
social ontology, an important part of the existence of a social structure is the amount of collective acceptance that is drawn to the structure. Following this understanding, formal theories, if they were to attract a greater amount of collective belief from certain groups, would in fact provide a type of understanding that exists with greater strength than some passing comprehension. As I understand it, within Searle’s framework, this would be the aim for political theory, social science, and social theory: to create theoretical structures that attract wide ranging support, which would strengthen a theory’s existence. However, this is a question of degree and any strength derived from support would be, like everything else, temporary. I do not question Sartre’s analysis that ontologically the structures of knowledge are the same as the structures of “my real life”. At certain points in time though, some structures can be stronger than others, according to Searle.

That being said, Sartre’s description of the nature of knowledge is largely in line with the description of social ontology that we are studying in this thesis. It provides an epistemology that is consistent with Searle’s description of social ontology and, therefore, meets the requirements of realism. But, as with Castoriadis’ argument regarding the need for a new logic, Sartre’s argument about the nature of comprehension — and the fact that this is the only knowledge possible for understanding the social realm — leaves political theory, social science, and social theory in a pretty difficult position.

Sartre’s argument implies that we would need to drastically reduce our hopes for the kind of knowledge that social theory can produce. There would be no chance of predictive models, defined concepts, methods for understanding, etc. The pursuit of social knowledge would be something without the kind of “scientific” pretensions it currently harbours. This is not much more optimistic than Castoriadis’ belief that we need a revolution thought. Playing the pragmatist then, I simply find it very difficult to believe that there is any chance of convincing the members of the academic disciplines grouped under the terms social science or social theory to, en masse, change what they have been doing for their whole careers in the pursuit of this philosophical goal. My question, then, to end, is how could we make some strides toward reality without asking political theorists, social scientists, and social theorists to fundamentally change the way they do their jobs?
4.4. Judging Theories: Realist Normative Methodology

If we accept that, when conducting research, political theory, social science and social theory should strive toward using methods and approaches that presuppose a social ontology that corresponds to a social reality similar to that described by Searle, then I do not think that there is a general solution to the problem of realism. As I have tried to demonstrate in parts two and three of this chapter, both of the general solutions presented to the kinds of problems that a social ontology like Searle’s poses for social theory demand fundamental changes in the way research is conducted and, quite frankly, I do not think that this is an achievable goal. However, I do think that realism, and realism in relation to a social ontology like Searle’s, is a worthy aim, even if it cannot be achieved entirely.

How then do we continue to pursue the goal of realism without calling for a revolution in the way that we conceptualise social phenomena? I believe that great strides would be made if we were simply to start taking the requirement of realism seriously, a requirement that I believe would seem a logical one for most people. By this I mean that it would be difficult to find someone who would contradict the general statement that political theory, social science, and social theory, should all strive to understand, as much as possible, the reality of the phenomena that they are studying. This is, fundamentally, what I understand realism to be.

What social ontology brings to the picture is the demand that one lay bare what it is they think social reality is — how it came into existence and how it then continues to exist. This provides the requirement of realism with a point of comparison. Social ontology provides realism with a reality. Comparing theories, then, with this reality — similarly to the comparison I conducted in this thesis between Searle’s description of social ontology and his theories of power and political power — is what I believe is the best currently available option for realist research. If researchers were to begin to systematically conduct such a comparative analysis whenever they encountered a new theory, I think we would definitely start moving in the right direction.

In more formal terms, I call this type of comparative analysis Realist Normative Methodology. What I mean by methodology is the analysis of theories by breaking them down into their constitutive elements — method, epistemology, and ontology — as discussed in part three of chapter three. This is by no means an exact science but rather encourages the critical analysis of theoretical structures with the aim of making
arguments about the kinds of epistemological and ontological preconceptions that might be hiding behind the approach used in a given theory.

This type of methodological analysis is one that is normative in the sense that its aim is to judge the kinds of preconceptions that it reveals. It is realist because the judgement that is made is with regard to whether or not the ontological preconceptions of a given theory are appropriate to the reality of the material that it is studying. For our purposes, what is being judged is whether the approach used by a given theory presupposes an ontology of the social phenomena it is studying that corresponds to what is deemed to be the general reality of the existence of social phenomena — an account of social ontology. Therefore, to have a general conception of social reality to compare our methodological analysis against, we need an account of social ontology that those people partaking in such an analysis agree on. In this thesis, that account has been Searle’s. In very general terms I conceive that this process can be conducted in four steps:

Realist Normative Methodology:
1. Define real ontology
2. Define the theory analysed by method
3. Infer ontology from method
4. Judge a theory’s presupposed ontology by its proximity to the defined real ontology

In other words, I think that if we are to be able to claim that there is a relatively consistent process by which we can judge the realism of theories we need to, first, define what we mean by reality — social ontology — then analyse theories, determine what kind of ontologies they presuppose, and judge whether these correspond to our predefined reality. I know that this provides very little indication about how one would, in fact, derive the ontological preconceptions of a given theory, but this is because, in my experience, this kind of analysis is one that is, on the one hand, relative to each theory analysed and, on the other, something that is more of the realm of argument than of the discovery of fact. Determining the ontological preconceptions of a theory is not a science, it is an argument presented based on an analysis that will be judged by those who read it.
I am not arguing here that we will be able to prove in any certain way whether a theory is realist or not. I believe, however, that a process such as this can prove revelatory of the kinds of presuppositions posited by assumptions and techniques often used unquestioned in political theory, social science, and social theory. My experience as a student of economics and of politics has shown me that, as you advance in your studies, your aims become less about fighting for whatever idealistic beliefs accompanied you as a bright-eyed first year undergraduate and more about producing work that resembles, and follows on from, the works of great thinkers that have been studied, and the professors who have inspired you. Students move into a mould of the way research is conducted within a discipline. Consequently, I believe that many of the research methods of the disciplines that come under the umbrella of social science or social theory are rarely questioned — not in any fundamental way, at any rate.

And all the while the accusation that certain theories are unrealistic remains one of the most common critiques made of social theories. Though what I am arguing for by no means provides a general solution to the problems posed by realism, I think it can make researchers confront what exactly it is they mean when they talk about reality and also face up to just how difficult a concept reality really is. This, to me, seems like a worthy pursuit in our current context where the number of publications in social science and social theory seems to grow at an unstoppable, exponential rate. Realist Normative Methodology, faced with this, would be able to clarify at least which theories share similar ontological presuppositions to one’s own.

If this type of approach to normative methodological analysis were to have any great influence on the way social theory was conducted, we would need to find an account of social ontology that people could generally agree upon. Unfortunately, I think there is about as much hope for that as there is for Castoriadis’ suggestion that we develop a new logic. That being said, I do believe that Searle's description is a convincing one and that much of what he describes, as already stated, can also be found in the social ontological descriptions presented by Tony Lawson, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In fact, I think that with some research it could be demonstrated that the constructed, dynamic, changing, appearing and disappearing view of social reality is in fact very widely held among philosophers and social scientists, even if it is ignored when the time comes to theorise. However, I concede that it is possible to believe in a different picture of social reality and, for realist normative methodology to function on anything
wider than an individual level, agreement about the description of social ontology is crucial. For that reason I do not think it wise to try and impose a vision of social reality.

What I am really suggesting is that, on the level of a class, or of a university department, for example, a discussion — of the sort had in groups such as the Cambridge Social Ontology Group or the Berkeley Social Ontology Group — could be held to try and determine what a small group of political theory students, for example, think reality is like. Together, they would try and find a more or less consensual picture of reality that everyone in the small group could adhere to and then the types of theories that they are studying in their degree program could be put to the test. I think that this could have important results on that kind of level insofar as it might create some clarity for students about what kinds of theories adhere more or less with their view of the world. It would also bring to light what kinds of fundamentally different beliefs people might hold about the reality of their existence.

Realist Normative Methodology is the kind of process we could start implementing now. First and foremost I think that it would, at the very least, clarify — within groups of people studying social theory — what we mean when we talk about reality. Moreover, I would hope that through analysing and making the kinds of normative judgments that I have described above, these same groups would get a better idea about the kinds of theories that correspond to the reality that they believe in, and therefore the kinds of research methods or approaches that might be more appropriate for them to use when they, in turn, begin their own research projects. If we began to do this, I think that, little by little, we might move toward a situation where political and social theorists are, generally, more conscious of the relationship that their theories entertain with philosophies of reality — that is, social ontology.

In summary, the problem posed by realism is that social reality is very difficult to understand. I looked at two answers to this issue — proposed by Castoriadis and Sartre, respectively — that, on one hand, suggested we need a new logic to be able to understand such a reality and, on the other, that the kind of comprehension that we can have of such a reality will never be of the order of formal knowledge. I have argued that neither of these answers provides a workable way forward for a realist agenda. Instead, I have suggested a far less ambitious response. I believe that the best thing that we can currently do is to accept political theory, social science, and social theory in general as they are. However, I think that starting at the level of university, we should try and
generalise the conducting of the kind of analysis that I have attempted in chapter three of this thesis — where a theory is compared with a description of social ontology.

I am not saying that we all need to follow Searle’s description of social ontology, though it does not seem to be an uncommon type of answer when faced with the question: what is social reality? In fact, I think a better first step would be if groups of students decided themselves what kind of account they would like to call social reality. In this way, we would increase the awareness that students have of what is meant by the notion of social reality while examining the kinds of different ideas people could have about the nature of social phenomena. Moreover, the hope would be that, by arriving at a conception of social reality through discussion and debate, the group would end up being more committed than otherwise to the description of social ontology that they eventually decide upon. This would then provide them with a measuring stick by which they would be able to discriminate between the ever-growing wealth of social theory. Students would be able to consistently argue which theories they think are realist, and which are not. Gradually, the hope would be, that by confronting students and even academics with what they conceive reality to be, we might move slowly closer to it.
Conclusion

If political theory, social science, and social theory in general can be unrealistic, that must mean that there exists a reality that they are diverging from. What is that reality? “Who knows...” is probably the most accurate answer. However, in recent years economists, philosophers, and political theorists have taken the question seriously and have tried to provide an answer. They have called this answer social ontology.

The aim of this thesis has been to put one of these descriptions — John Searle’s — up against a political theory of his own — regarding power and political power — to see what kind of difficulties might arise when political theories are confronted with the reality they are trying to understand. In doing so, I have sought to answer the question: what does it mean for a political or social theory to be realist?

With Searle’s social reality as its opponent, any theory would have its work cut out for it. I have shown that Searle’s reality is one where all social structures are created by the declaration of a human being or human beings and where those structures exist for as long as people collectively recognise their existence. This picture of reality, I have argued, is one where social structures are constantly being created, are constantly changing, and are constantly disappearing. Searle’s social reality is inherently dynamic, something that is pretty hard to pin down.

Searle’s ideas about social reality are convincing. However, what I have tried to demonstrate in this thesis is that this poses a big problem for political and social theory. How would we faithfully conceptualise phenomena with regard to such a reality? Unfortunately, I do not know. A good place to look, I would have thought, would be when a theorist who has, themselves, outlined a vision of social ontology, tries their hand at social theorising.

This was the plan by looking at Searle’s concepts of power and political power. I observed, and argued, however, that Searle’s approach to understanding these concepts — to search for a definition among “paradigmatic” uses of the terms “power” or “political power” — largely ignored what his theory of social ontology would imply about such phenomena. Searle still tried to pin down, in rather classical fashion, what power is. I tried to show that this method, inappropriate for understanding an inherently changing phenomenon, led Searle into difficulty. Moreover, I argued that if we
are to define social phenomena, we need to recognise that what we are doing is creating new social structures, not discovering something fundamental about others, and that our definitions are then as inherently unstable as all other social phenomena. Unfortunately, I asserted that social structures — as described by Searle’s social ontology — are not amenable to definition or categorisation in a classical sense.

Therefore, the question remained: how could we faithfully conceptualise such a reality? I looked at two answers. First, Castoriadis’, in which he argued that the nature of logic was fundamentally unable to conceptualise social phenomena and that, to do so, we would need a new logic. Second, Sartre’s, in which he argued that we must accept that the knowledge created of social phenomena can never be formalised or reach the heights of certainty attained in natural science. Knowledge of social phenomena can never be more than comprehension. These answers make sense but they do not provide a particularly optimistic way forward.

My suggestion is that we should simply, among students and teachers of political theory, social science, and social theory in general, start thinking seriously about the reality that we are trying to understand. Social ontology is a good way to do this because its aim is to provide a description of the way that social reality exists. It forces you to try and outline a general vision of what social reality is like. This gives some substance to the term “reality”, which is so often void of all filling.

With an outline of social ontology at hand, it is possible to say exactly why one might think that a political theory, for example, is unrealistic. Moreover, it allows this kind of analysis to be conducted for many theories with some measure of consistency, that is, using the same vision of social reality as a measuring stick. My suggestion, then, quite simply is to encourage students and teachers to start conducting this kind of comparative analysis. I think this could be a progressive way toward more realist ways of conceptualising social phenomena.

Furthermore, if we were to find that there was a high level of general agreement about social ontology, there might be a potential for this comparative normative approach to make progress toward realism on a larger scale. Though I am somewhat doubtful that it would be possible to get that kind of wide-reaching agreement, I do think that the picture of social reality described by Searle is one that many prominent philosophers — including many that predate those that call what they are doing “social ontology” — in fact adhere to.
Encouraging universities to generalise reflection about reality among the students of political theory, social science, and social theory would be a good start. Indeed, it is what I have presented as my pragmatic solution to realism in part four of chapter four. However, I do think there is a larger project, for those ambitious youngsters studying social ontology, which should be to search for, and to demonstrate, just how much consensus actually exists about the inherently changing nature of social material. For it is only through showing that a description of reality such as Searle’s is a widely held belief that there would ever be a chance for theories to be pushed toward this kind of realism with any real force.
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