



The Construction of Social Reality

John Rogers Searle

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Construction of Social Reality

John Rogers Searle

The Construction of Social Reality John Rogers Searle

This short treatise looks at how we construct a social reality from our sense impressions; at how, for example, we construct a 'five-pound note' with all that implies in terms of value and social meaning, from the printed piece of paper we see and touch.

"John Searle has a distinctive intellectual style. It combines razor-sharp analysis with a swaggering chip-on-the-shoulder impudence that many of his opponents might find intolerably abrasive were it not for the good humour that pervades all he writes. This is a man who likes a good philosophical brawl." --*New Scientist*

The Construction of Social Reality Details

Date : Published January 1st 1997 by Free Press (first published March 1995)

ISBN : 9780684831794

Author : John Rogers Searle

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Sociology, Psychology

 [Download The Construction of Social Reality ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Construction of Social Reality ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Construction of Social Reality John Rogers Searle

From Reader Review *The Construction of Social Reality* for online ebook

Marc Nash says

Really disappointing although possibly my fault in a bad choice. I had assumed this was going to be an argument about how everything we take as reality is in fact a construction of mind and language. But it posited that there are a group of 'brute facts' that exist with or without there being anyone to observe it (if a tree falls in a forest but there's no one to hear it etc), such as there is snow on top of Mount Everest, and then there is a category of socially constructed reality such as money, marriage, baseball rules etc. The second is obviously true, in that other species don't have marriage, money or baseball, but the 'brute facts' rely entirely on our human perception and conception and of course language. 'Snow is white' is not a brute fact, because colour is entirely reliant on the human oracular apparatus as to how light reflects off bodies. Our senses of perception and how our mind arranges this data and how we frame it in language utterly construct reality, whether it persists beyond our own existence or not. We wouldn't be able to call that big lump of rock a mountain, or Everest, or even lump & rock if humans weren't around to conceptualise all that. There would be a solid mass existing in deep time, but even solid, mass & time are human conceptions.

The arguments are dominated by the weaknesses in counter arguments, so that somehow disproving counter arguments is offered to stand as proof for the last argument standing, which it doesn't. Seems to be these 'winning' arguments are just as vulnerable to disproof as the ones Searle chooses to take down with logic. And finally, for an example of how this book disappears up its own jacksie, he argues or tries to argue about the difference between 'truth' and 'fact' and gets nowhere.

Let's face it., Wittgenstein's work on language has queered the field for all subsequent philosophy. Language is an intercessionary layer on everything that removes it one level from any material proof.

Rob says

Searle has taken on an extremely interesting subject, how the objects of our social life come to be. What is the nature (or ontology) of money, weddings, court proceedings, state lines, war, and other "social facts" compared to "brute facts" such as the temperature outside, the composition of the computer you now use, and the number of fingers on your hand? This book clearly spells out an External Realist position on the basic constructs of the world we inhabit, whether socially constructed or found in nature. At the end of the book he offers a brief but competent defense of realism and critique of anti-realism.

Jeff Rowe says

First off, I know exactly squat about philosophy. In fact, I don't even like it very much because usually whatever the philosophy dude is saying is incomprehensible to me. Along comes this John Searle book, so I read a few pages. Wow, I actually understood what the guy is saying. So I kept going. The basic idea is that we've been hobbled by Cartesian dualism for a long time, which claims that the only thing real is objective truth apprehensible through reason (science). Subjective experience is an illusion and an unreliable source of truth. Searle shows that there are (at least) four types of truths that are very real. In addition to objective

reality and subjective experience, he adds social reality, which is created by subjective individuals but is a first class object in our reality in its own right. There is also objective realities that are only available through direct experience, like feeling pain. What makes it all easy to understand is that he goes heavy on the examples: sports, money, marriage, law. Very, very good. There are places where he takes unnecessary detours. I didn't follow the reasoning, not because it was difficult, but because it was dull and he had already given me a plausible enough argument. I guess he put it in so that his critics who actually know about philosophy would be hammered completely flat. The sections on the existence of objective reality at the end were good, but to deny that assertion in first place requires some serious navel gazing in my opinion. It's a great, great book that gives me some extra tools when trying to make sense of the world. Thanks John Searle.

IWB says

In this book, Searle's project is to give an account of the existence of social phenomena in a one-world ontology; that is, an ontology that presupposes naturalism. His project is descriptive insofar as he attempts to explain how social fact (y) is derived from or constructed "on top" of brute facts (x's). Facts about social institutions (such as money or marriage) are objectively true in a world constituted by atoms and fields of force for the following reason: Institutions and other conventions are constituted by collective beliefs that confer status and powers on objects and events. They are mind-dependent yet objective because locutions such as "Dollars are legal tender in the U.S." or "John and Dawn are married" are said to be "true" or "false."

Searle begins by making a number of conceptual distinctions, which will serve as the tools for constructing the required mechanisms that generate social ontology. One such distinction concerns features of the world. There are those that are intrinsic features of the world and those that are extrinsic or observer relative features of the world. Intrinsic features are agent independent. For instance, mountains and molecules are, according to Searle, things that exist independently of our representations of them. It is true of the object I'm sitting on that it has a certain mass and chemical composition; that it is made partly of wood, the cells of which are composed of cellulose fibers, and so forth. All such features are intrinsic, claims Searle. Observer relative features are agent dependent. For instance, it is true of a certain object, which consists of various intrinsic features, that it is also a screwdriver. To describe something as a screwdriver is to specify a feature of the object that is observer or agent relative. Screwdrivers are not things you find intrinsically in the world, even though there are objects that are screwdrivers. Searle makes a further distinction the objective and subjective, which are then further divided into those that are epistemic and those that are ontological. The epistemic concerns predicates of judgments. There are subjective epistemic judgments "Rembrandt is a better artist than Reubens." There also are objective epistemic judgments "Rembrandt lived in Amsterdam during the year 1632." The ontological concerns predicates of entities. There are subjective ontological predicates such as pains, and there are objective ontological predicates such as mountains. All these distinctions serve as the basic toolkit that Searle uses to carve up what he takes to be social ontology.

One of the interesting arguments Searle employs is his function argument. Searle argues that, unlike causes, functions are intensional, not extensional; functions are observer relative and, hence, are not intrinsic features of the world. His argument against intrinsic functionality is analogous to the argument against the substitutivity of terms in referentially opaque contexts.

Consider Leibniz's Law:

Fa

a=b

Therefore

Fb

The substitution of co-referential terms does not affect the truth-value of the sentence as a whole. Now consider the following invalid instantiation:

Wolfgang believes that Hesperus is Hesperus
Hesperus is Phosphorus
Therefore
Wolfgang believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

The principle of substitutivity is applied illicitly here, and Searle thinks that substitutability in function contexts, likewise, yields invalidity. The following schema, therefore, is invalid:

A's function is to X
X-ing = Y-ing
Therefore
A's function is to Y

Searle claims that arguments for intrinsic functionality fail to capture the ordinary notion of function. So, Searle's function argument serves as a premise for the overall argument that either one's account fits with substitutivity and is, therefore, observer relative, or one must redefine the sense in which the term "function" is being used.

Among the notion of a function, Searle distinguishes the following kinds: Agentive and nonagentive. Agentive functions are those that are agent dependent; e.g., chairs, screwdrivers, paperweights. Nonagentive functions are those that are agent independent; e.g., pumping hearts.

Searle's project also includes giving an account of collective intentionality, which involves cooperative behavior and shared intentional states. Searle spells out an interesting negative account of "we intentions" but leaves much to be desired if you are looking for a full treatment of this fascinating aspect of ontology.

Another aspect of his ontological toolkit is the notion of constitutive rules and regulative rules. Regulative rules are antecedent to the phenomena of which they regulate: "Drive on the right-hand side of the road." Constitutive rules, however, determine the phenomena of which they govern: "Playing chess is constituted in part by acting in accord with the rules." Constitutive rules have the form: "X counts as Y in context C."

Searle's project is an interesting one, though not a novel one; and it is noteworthy that he does not greatly refer to those who have engaged in projects similar to his, such as Heidegger, Foucault, or Merleau Ponty; or for that matter his contemporaries such as Ian Hacking and Sally Haslanger. There are a number of problems with Searle's account. One of which is his vague use of 'brute fact'. You get the sense that Searle knows that if he presses this concept for all it's worth, he'll end up with something like a Kantian "thing-in-itself;" but Searle tries to avoid being committed to this (it doesn't rub well with naïve realism). Further difficulties arise when Searle's notion of a 'background' is cashed out. Again, Searle seems to be committing himself to more than his toolkit allows for. There also is not a strong position on the way in which our concept use plays into the construction of various social entities, and how this concept use and construction is related to collective

intentionality.

Regarding collective intentionality, Searle claims that cooperative intention constrains one's individual intention. I think his argument for this (which I'm not giving here) has many problems, but as is the case with most philosophical arguments that don't quite succeed, it is interesting, and yields plenty of further argumentative fruit.

All in all the book is well worth reading, and I've hardly said anything that should dissuade anyone from reading it. It would have been nice, however, if Searle had dealt with some of the more interesting and difficult issues that arise from his project, which people like Hacking and Haslanger and Elgin have dealt with.

Blyden says

The Social Construction of Reality, a sociology of knowledge by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann which explained the existence of social facts, social objects, and social institutions from a phenomenological and broadly symbolic interactionist perspective, with a focus on the importance of language, was published in 1966. It was a seminal work in the constructivist movement within the social sciences and probably originated, or at least popularized the concept of "social construction". It is a well-known, marginally famous book within sociology, the content of which is presented in reduced form in a great many introductory sociology textbooks and its popularity is not limited to sociology.

In the context of familiarity with and appreciation of Berger & Luckmann's book and sharing a phenomenological perspective, a couple months ago I came across some supportive references to John R. Searle's book on the same general topic with the very similar title, **The Construction of Social Reality** (1995), and decided to read it. I have now read through the end of Chapter 2, and have decided to abandon the book. I find it flawed and more than a little absurd. I do not recommend it.

The first problem I have with this book is that it seems very much to be written as a philosophical reply or answer to, yet has no mention of, Berger and Luckmann's much earlier work. Not only does it cover the same general content as Berger & Luckmann and have a title that plays directly on theirs, but Searle explicitly frames his book as a rejection of phenomenological philosophy. One on p.2 and the other on p.5: "We cannot just describe how it seems to us from an internal phenomenological point of view..." (Of course the phenomenologists would say we have no choice but to describe it that way.) Moreover in the introduction he writes "...one might suppose that they would have been addressed and solved already in the various social sciences... [but] as far as I can tell the questions I am addressing in this book have not been satisfactorily answered in the social sciences." What can I make of this? It may be that this is intended as a slam of Berger & Luckmann predicated on the word "satisfactorily". It doesn't seem possible that a competent scholar doing a literature review on this topic, or with this title in mind, could possibly fail to turn up references to Berger & Luckmann's work. Nor does it seem possible that a scholar sharing these ideas with other scholars would not at some point have someone mention the obvious similarities to their work. That seems to leave us with two possibilities: that Searle either is incompetent as a scholar, or else is being disingenuous in failing to explicitly reference Berger & Luckmann.

A second major problem I find with this book is that he begins with the presumption of an objective reality.

The core question of the work, framed either as “How are institutional facts possible?” or “How is a socially constructed reality possible?” – referencing a concept that probably originated with Berger & Luckmann’s work – only make sense if one has assumed an objective reality. To a phenomenologist these aren’t questions at all, and an objective reality can only be known or dealt with through necessarily subjective knowledge. An interesting illustration arises from Searle’s comments on p.6-7 in which he presents atomic theory and evolutionary theory not as theory or knowledge but as objective reality. Unfortunately we can never know with absolute certainty that atoms or evolution or any other knowledge of what we presume to be an objective world is the reality itself as opposed to merely being our current model of it. Past models of what was thought to be objective reality have at times been replaced by newer models, and these two may be superseded in the future.

Searle offers a discussion of function which seems to offer nothing new, not already well known to social science. He discusses the special category of symbolic functions, e.g. language, in a way that very much parallels the central importance of language in Berger & Luckmann’s theory.

Searle suggests that there is collective intentionality, which presumes collective conscience. He offers absolutely no evidence that such a thing exists, arguing for it instead on the grounds that it is a more parsimonious, elegant explanation for social action than the negotiated, symbolic social interaction model that underlies nearly all microsociology. I think, unfortunately for Searle, this is one instance in which Occam’s razor fails. All it would take for his argument is to show even one example of collective intentionality in which there was an absence of symbolic social interaction, but apparently he can think of none. Neither can I. I am inclined to think such examples do not exist. If that is true it would seem to be strong evidence that Searle’s model is simply wrong.

Searle defines the term “social fact” in terms of collective intentionality, and “institutional fact” as a subclass of “social fact”, the latter being facts that “require special human institutions for their very existence” (p.27). Institutional facts are contrasted with “brute” or “natural” facts that, in Searle’s view, exist independently of human, i.e. social, institutions.

Consideration of how institutional facts are created is the main theme of Chapter 2. He suggests that many institutional facts are self-referential, by which he means they can only exist as such because people accept that they exist. Money is a prime example of self-referential fact. Its value and use as money is predicated on people recognizing and accepting it as such. This is a large part of what Berger & Luckmann meant to say that something was socially constructed, but Searle thinks the self-referential quality is limited to institutional facts, whereas Berger & Luckmann suggest that all social knowledge, all “objective” facts, are social constructions. Who’s right? On p.33 Searle writes “Something can be a mountain even if no one believe it is a mountain”. Other than the hypothetical case that Searle has implied in the question, is this statement true? I don’t think so. No person can present any concrete example of a mountain that no one believes is a mountain. That’s precisely because even the concept of a mountain, which seems to be a very “natural” and “objective” object, is a social construction. Facts are not objective reality. They are knowledge of a (presumably) objective reality, and thus they themselves are subjective. The physical object presumably would remain no matter what we call it, but the concept of a mountain is self-referential, i.e. socially constructed, just like money is. It exists because people recognize it as such.

There are other, similar examples in this chapter. Searle wants to tell us that a printed dollar bill that falls between the cracks of the floor of the mint and is never circulated is nevertheless money, but that a perfect counterfeit bill that no one recognizes as counterfeit and which is circulated and accepted is not money. Both of those assertions are false, I think. Whatever is accepted as money is money, and what is not circulated can, at best, only have the potential to be money. “Money”, he writes, “has to exist in some physical form.” That

seems unlikely. We have replaced precious resources with fiat paper money and to some extent have replaced paper money with electronic tick marks in the magnetization of credit cards or computer records of a bank account balance. Even those, I suppose, have at least the symbol as a physical form, but there seems to be nothing other than the inconvenience of keeping track mentally, to stop people from having a currency that consists entirely in peoples' cognitions without any physical marker or form whatsoever. By the end of Chapter 2 I'd found enough that I found simply incongruent with the way that the world actually operates, as I understand it, that I quit this book.

Searle is no doubt correct when he writes that "much of our world view depends on our concept of objectivity and the contrast between the objective and subjective...." (p.7) Throw out the concept of objectivity and recognize that the objective can only be known subjectively and Searle's whole line of thought tumbles into the garbage can.

Per Kraulis says

The analysis is pretty clear, although quite dry and abstract. The book does not spell out very well what consequences its line of argument has in current discussions. It seems to me that a wider discussion in terms of the evolution of humans and their society would be useful. The discussion about "external realism" show how absurd various kinds of anti-realism are, and also gives some explanation of why these absurd positions still are fairly popular.

Chad S. says

Post-Modernism got you down? Are your friends speaking of "truth" in the plural? If so, Searle has the answer for you! All kidding aside, the book indirectly addresses prevailing viewpoints of post-modernism and post-structuralism as aforementioned. The book begins with Searle making the distinction between what Anscombe dubbed, "brute facts," facts that are not dependent upon human-life, and what he calls "social facts" and "institutional facts," which are dependent upon human existence. His main argument throughout the book is that there can exist objective facts in this world that are dependent on human life, and just because it is a human construction, it doesn't automatically mean it's subjective or relative to the person. The book is incredibly well written and structured. Searle's prose are very clear and the examples in which he gives are very helpful. The book was very easy to understand throughout its entirety. In addition to his original thesis about social constructed facts, he devotes two chapters at the end to argue for two other philosophical positions needed in order to accept his original argument. In the first of these two chapters he argues for the existence of an external world, and in the second of the two, he argues for the correspondence theory of truth. His arguments maintain their veracity in both of these chapters. He is also very charitable when critiquing his opponent's position--something I appreciate. Although the book does get technical and it presupposes an exposure to particular philosophers, I still recommend it to someone who is just getting into philosophy. Furthermore, it also has much to offer to those already interested in the subject, especially those intrigued by the connection between our world and our language.

Theresa Macphail says

I found this to be an intriguing counterpoint to the social constructionism of the 80s and early 90s. Read in juxtaposition to Latour and in conjunction with Hacking, I think that Searle makes an interesting argument. This might be a bit "dated" by now, but if you're going to read Latour and Woolgar, I see no reason not to indulge in work that was a reaction to the Social Construction of Facts.

Interesting side note: Political scientists were assigning this book at Cal last fall, which is why I picked it up in the first place. I'd be curious to know why Searle has gone out of favor recently.

Matt says

Searle's explanation of social and institutional facts (e.g. money, marriage, war) is very interesting and a valuable introduction to concepts we all know are there but don't quite know how to think about.

This exposition ended after chapter six. Chapters seven, eight and nine are a defense External Realism (the view that there is a world independent of conscious representation) and the Correspondence Theory of Truth (the view that for a statement to be true it must correspond to some 'fact' in the world). In my opinion, these discussions might have been interesting, but they were ultimately irrelevant--they did not connect with the earlier chapters.

There can be no doubt that External Realism is assumed in linguistic practices and institutional/social practices more generally, but from this fact alone it does not follow that External Realism is actually true--the assumption of ER could simply be a pragmatic practice.

I am not saying that I disagree with ER, but simply that Searle should not have bothered defending it because it does not bear on his initial thesis. In my opinion, Searle should have simply said "I will assume ER to be true..."

Gavin Morgan says

Wow, was this text a slog. It took me almost a year — and that's with it sitting on my bedside table, every night! Why didn't I give up? Because the subject matter seemed so fundamental, so timelessly and universally applicable to human life.

We are cogs in these social machines. There is no way around it. To sit alone, in silence, is still to machinate social constructs for all but the most enlightened bodhisattva.

This text was a thorough, albeit labyrinthian, exploration of the simple machines comprising our inescapable social enterprise.

I cannot recommend it for fun. I did not hardly enjoy this effort. The fruits of my intellectual labors — a picnic compared to the labors of the author — were dry, but nutritious.

After having read this text, reflected on it, and tried to work it into conversations — a more difficult exercise

than for most other books I've read — I do feel as though I can "see the matrix" in my daily life.

Just a bit.

Perhaps I need to re-read this, but I cannot bear the thought of juggling such terms as "regulative/constitutive rules", "brute/social/institutional facts", "agentive/nonagentive functions", or "ontologically/epistemologically objective/subjective facts".

By the end, we're crunching ostensibly whole schools of thought into radically dense terms like "disquotation" and "correspondence theory" — which Searle labels tautological predicates.

I don't know. It made me feel like an undergraduate philosophy student, and I struggled to incorporate it into my praxis.

I only rate it so highly because it does seem to be aimed directly at the core of society. If only that path were less grueling.

Eduardo Folster says

John Rogers Searle basically argues against the postmodern view that "all of reality is somehow a human creation, that there are no brute facts" (p. 2). Searle puts forward some interesting arguments to demonstrate that "there are facts in the world that make our statements true and that statements are true because they correspond to the facts" (p. 2). It is a good reading for those who would like to dive into a philosophical and sociological challenge to the idea that reality exists only in the eye of the beholder, which is something that has almost become a pervasive concept and many take it for granted. Searle's main arguments are in chapters 7, 8, and 9.

Andrew Han says

In his book, Searle proposes a general theory of institutional facts and how they interact to form social reality. In the first few chapters he lays out preliminary philosophical groundwork. Then he proposes his general theory and addresses a set of common objections. In the last few chapters he defends the existence of external reality and the correspondence theory of truth.

The book is interesting by virtue of the sheer ambition of what Searle is trying to accomplish – a theory of the underlying ontological structure of society. However, I didn't find some of the arguments that he made (e.g., against the circularity of institutional facts, in favor of the correspondence theory of truth and external reality) to be particularly compelling.

Still, the book is an interesting application of analytic philosophy in more sociological realms! 4/5

Leo Horovitz says

My first contact with Searle, or at least the first time I actually *read* a text by Searle, was roughly a year and

a half ago, when I was attending a philosophy class where we were supposed to write an essay on a subject of our own choosing in the area of the philosophy of mind. I had gotten interested in Searle's argument against the possibility of strong AI because I had been in contact with his Chinese room thought experiment while studying AI during my computer science studies several years ago (a project, I can mention as an aside, with which I am still not done...) The particular text I was reading then was Searle's classic "Mind, Brains and Programs" in which he presents the above mentioned thought experiment and argues against strong AI. I found something deeply wrong with his presentation of the arguments coming from the other side and thought he completely misunderstood the issues involved. My essay was based around using Daniel Dennett's intentional stance (or strategy) and its implications for the conclusions we can draw as to what entities are truly intentional, and turned that against Searle's statements of what needs to be fulfilled in order for us to say of some entity that it was intentional. The experience did not give me a good impression of Searle, I found his arguments to be completely erroneous and concluded that he had no basis for claiming that intentionality can only be supposed to exist "for real" in an entity if it is discovered to display "the right causal relations" (whatever that's supposed to mean). Dennett's account was much more reasonable in that it concluded that wherever we are able to use the intentional strategy to predict the behavior of some entity in such a way that we could not do without the intentional strategy, we have reason to conclude that the entity *actually* has intentionality (Dennett is often misunderstood as having an instrumentalist view of intentionality, which is simply not true, he says clearly that it is a real, objective phenomenon).

In any case, this first impression was, as I said, not good. At the same time I realized, of course, that one single paper was hardly grounds for dismissing Searle as a philosopher on the whole. Hence, I felt that I should probably read some more of Searle's writings sometime in the future. Roughly a year later the opportunity came when I attended a class (actually, two different classes taken after each other, filling up the fall semester) on the philosophy of science. In the second of these two classes, we read a book called "Understanding Philosophy of Science" by James Ladyman, which was a more or less traditional introduction to the subject, dealing with the scientific method, changes in scientific theories (Kuhn's "paradigms" and "scientific revolutions") as well as a part about realism (a book I have yet to finish, I'm behind in more than one place in my studies). The other book was the present one and it supplied a very different take on some of the issues concerning science and reality. Without going into the scientific method or the justification of science (something which Searle, quite rightly, takes for granted) Searle treats *fact* in the most general sense, giving a very convincing and easy to follow account of how he can combine his view of the world as *one* unified entity with the existence of social fact, which seem to differ greatly from "brute" facts of nature as he calls them. The account goes through how any social or institutional fact can be said to have the structure "X counts as Y in C" meaning that a specific object or other phenomenon X can be counted as an instance of a social phenomenon Y in a certain context C. This all need to bottom out, ultimately, in an X which is a brute natural fact, but complex structures of social and institutional facts can be established by building higher and higher levels upon the lower level, meaning that a certain social fact can consist in counting *another* social fact X as a new social fact Y (in a context C). This avoids an infinite regress by demanding that there is a brute fact at the bottom, this is what makes it possible to maintain the actual existence of social facts while also claiming that there is one and only one world.

After dealing with these issues in quite a great deal of detail, along the way dealing with and refuting social constructionism and other theories found absurd, he closes with three chapters arguing for some basic ideas about reality and truth that are not exactly part of the project undertaken in the book's main part (which is why they are placed in the end), but are nonetheless presupposed by his account of social facts. Here, Searle defends realism, shows how the common arguments against realism does not hold up to scrutiny, and shows why realism, while not directly provable, is a necessary presupposition for talking at all about the world. An interesting aspect of all this is that he does not, as hinted at just now, aim at proving a thesis directly, but instead aims to show how some positions he takes are necessary by a *transcendental* form of argument. The

final chapter deals with truth and defends, to my satisfaction, the correspondence theory of truth so that it has been shown, once again, that it follows by necessity from some basic ideas we have about truth such that it would not be possible to talk about truth in a reasonable sense of the word without it having a meaning such that a true statement is true in virtue of a sort of correspondence to the external world.

It's a wonderful account of a set of related ideas, seemingly centered around defending the view that an external world exists, that at the bottom we find brute facts, that we can build layers of social and institutional facts on top of these, and that all these facts have in common that they describe some conditions on the world on which true statements are based. It's clear, straight forward, calm, very well written, interesting and extremely insightful. I maintain my previous assessment of Searle regarding his discussion of AI and intentionality (to a certain extent, I actually think he's probably right about the nature of intentionality in a sense, but that he is wrong in dismissing Dennett's account of how we come to know that some entity *does* exhibit intentionality), but my overall view of Searle as a philosopher has (to say the least) been greatly changed for the better.

Joshua Stein says

Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality* is terrific as a brief introduction to Searle's view of metaphysics; it takes a stab at giving an account of social institutions in terms of psychological features distributed across collections of individuals and, so far as I can tell, is the most successful attempt at bridging the gap between the physical, psychological, and social in recent intellectual history. There are many reasons to be concerned about Searle's ideas (his open use of Cartesian language to contrast the physical and psychological; limited attention to the way that social institutions shape individual and social psychology, etc.) but overall the work is a solid piece of philosophy and deserves the attention that it's been given.

Those who disagree with Searle, in particular, should be obligated to read this particular text. It's a clean and straightforward articulation of his views, and does take some time to show the ways that his views about social reality interact with his views about language and thought. Whether you agree with him on any of those subjects (and most people disagree with him on most subjects) it is important to have an understanding of Searle, as someone who has been widely influential in philosophy. This book is probably the best introduction to his views I've come across, and is fairly accessible.

Bryan says

This is probably my favorite of John Searle's always readable, always fascinating books. The subject is an extrapolation of Searle's earlier work and grounds some of his later books. In it, he attempts to give an ontological account of social facts, like money, presidents, and universities, as distinct from brute facts, for instance, the atomic weight of hydrogen. To borrow Searle's language, how can X count as Y in context C, when there is nothing about X's brute facts that would indicate its social fact status Y? The short answer would be that we all agree that X counts as Y, so this piece of paper is a twenty dollar bill because our society says so, collectively. But Searle goes a bit further than that. He gives an amazing taxonomy of facts, he shows how we can be epistemically objective about ontologically subjective features of the world, he outlines how imposition of function works, and he even gives a short defense of the correspondence theory of truth (which, I'm sure, would please his old teacher, J.L. Austin).

I read this book about ten years ago as a young, conflicted student, with a certain amount of anxiety about more relativistic philosophical theories. This book seemed like a bolt from heaven at the time, and I felt that it did a pretty good job untangling some of the misunderstandings that lead to those kinds of theories. Searle is one of our more ambitious philosophers, but the great thing about reading one of his books is that, unlike many other in this tradition, he is always clear, conversational, and very, very funny.

Thomas says

An interesting mix of linguistics and philosophy, Searles gives a lot of information on why are cultures are what they are. Lots of vocabulary you may need to look up, but easy to follow, and good source material, some more books for my book pile. Learn things, check it out.

Tyler says

How can ideas that depend upon the human mind be said to be true? Does there even exist such a thing as social facts? Many thinkers have doubted it, but only now has a philosopher taken the question up.

John Searle shows here how ontologically subjective concepts can be objective facts. Intentionality is key, but only collective intentionality makes social facts possible. Yet this collective intentionality is exactly what libertarians deny – consider Margaret Thatcher, who tells us there are no societies, only individuals. What can Searle say to this without raising the specter of a Hegelian Absolute? His precise line of reasoning I leave for the book's readers to assess.

In any case, Searle links physical entities to social facts by describing those facts as labels of intentionality. Physical entities can “count as” (the intending consciousness) mental facts, such as paper rectangle that counts as money. And social objects (a dollar), at bottom, are simply placeholders for some *activity* (commerce).

The joint buildout of social and ontological facts is the basis of institutions, and here again, fact implies function. A government is an institutional fact; more importantly, it is a function or activity. The upshot is that power grows out of organizations, not individuals.

Social and institutional facts, the author further explains, are true when a “sufficient number” of people in a community treat them as facts. Again, an institution, say a bank, is an ontologically subjective concept. But its acceptance by the people who use it makes it epistemically objective.

As to the individual, we learn nothing. Searle doesn't tell us what a “sufficient” number is, or what the status of an institution's opponents or dropouts is. Searle finds it amusing that the individual can be thought of as possessing inherent rights. Does that invalidate the power of whatever institutions recognize or enable that concept? Here the discussion stops, perhaps awaiting another book. Meantime, *The Unconscious Civilization* is a short read I recommend to fill the gap.

Searle does address a related problem, the aforementioned Hegelian idealism, public enemy number one of the individual according to so many. And here Searle has a lot to say. The book, in fact, contains two parts. The exploration of the institution ends the first part. The second part is a defense of both realism and the

book feels dense. I had to slow myself down and unpack some of his language at times, but that's not to say that it's written in a complicated way. On the contrary, actually.

It wasn't until I finished, felt that I enjoyed it, only to Google what John Searle was up to these days. His history of sexual misconduct and harassment with students doesn't change any of his arguments, but it sure made me sick to my stomach after the fact.
