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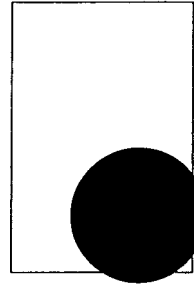
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John Searle on a witch hunt

A commentary on John R. Searle's essay
'Social ontology: Some basic principles'

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Abstract

In this commentary I respond to John Searle's conceptual framework for the interpretation of 'social facts' as a provocation to spell out some of the philosophical foundations of the romantic pluralist tradition in cultural anthropology. Romantic pluralists in anthropology seek to affirm (to the extent such affirmation is reasonably possible) what the philosopher John Gray describes as 'the reality, validity and human intelligibility of values and forms of life very different from our own'. With special attention to two examples of contemporary social facts (a witchcraft tribunal in Africa and death pollution practices in a Hindu temple town), the commentary raises questions about John Searle's approach to the mind-body problem and his account of epistemic objectivity and ontological subjectivity with regard to social facts. An alternative philosophy of the real is proposed that makes it possible for anthropologists to give an intelligible account of forms of life different from one's own without interpreting those forms of life (and related pictures of the world) as either reified illusions or fetishized figments of a collective imagination.

Key Words

death pollution • romantic pluralism • John Searle • social facts • witchcraft

With regard to the practice of anthropology, a good deal turns on the answers one gives to some of the questions John Searle's essay forces us to confront. The type of anthropology I practice – let's call it the romantic pluralist tradition in cultural anthropology (Shweder, 1991, 2003) – seeks to affirm (to the extent such affirmation is reasonably possible) what the philosopher John Gray (1996; writing about Isaiah Berlin) describes as 'the reality, validity and human intelligibility of values and forms of life very different from our own'. Reading John Searle's views about the basic principles of social ontology, I found myself provoked to re-examine my own philosophical assumptions about the practice of pluralistic cultural anthropology. I am very grateful to John Searle

for this opportunity to grapple with his formulation, even if in this response I end up outlining a somewhat different account of what it means for forms of life different from one's own to be (a) real, (b) valid, and (c) intelligible.

Offering a response of that type is undoubtedly hazardous, in part because John Searle is so smart, in part because his essay is thick with distinctions (some of which I may misunderstand), in part because the types of philosophical problems that arise in any discussion of the reality, validity and intelligibility of 'social facts' are hard problems, even for philosophers, and in part because John Searle's analysis of social facts (including 'institutional social facts') may seem appealing to some kinds of pluralists in anthropology (especially those who are conventionalists in their analysis of social norms). Nevertheless, in this essay I will jump into the fray and try to work my way through John Searle's conceptual framework in order to arrive at a partial statement about what I take to be a somewhat different philosophical foundation for a somewhat different kind of pluralist tradition in anthropology.

Initially however, for the sake of the conceptual analysis and philosophical discussion that will follow, I would like to describe briefly two events: the first a witchcraft tribunal in Africa; the second a violation of the death pollution norms associated with the care of the dead in India. I present them as illustrations of the anthropological encounter with different forms of life, whose reality, validity and human intelligibility at least some anthropologists (the romantic pluralistic ones) would like to affirm (if such an affirmation can be justified within the bounds of reason).

THE WITCHCRAFT TRIBUNAL

I have never been on a witch hunt or sat on a tribunal to decide whether someone died because of witchcraft, but I have long wondered how John Searle would have voted (given his theory of social facts) if he had been a judge at the following witch trial, which took place on location somewhere in Africa. A tough-minded scientific anthropologist I know, who had done many years of field research in the region, was one of the three judges on the panel. He was recruited by a local headman (and long-time friend) who trusted the anthropologist's judgment (and deontic capacities) and believed he was knowledgeable enough about local practices to understand how and when to apply a particular Y term (death by witchcraft) in the 'X counts as Y in context C' formula used by reasonable and morally decent members of the local group. The anthropologist, operating in a participant observer mode and honored to be accepted as an insider, assumed the relevant status (and associated obligations) of a judge on a witchcraft tribunal.

The facts (whether brute or otherwise, whether objective in the epistemic sense or not) of the case, as presented at the trial, were as follows. A local renowned lion-hunter had been mauled by a lion in front of several eyewitnesses. The point of the tribunal was to decide whether the hunter had been killed by an ordinary lion or by a witch-lion. The eyewitnesses testified that the dead man, who was known to be an expert shot, had been out using his gun to good effect, shooting and killing this or that type of animal. Then this lion appeared out of nowhere. They expected it to just run away (as lions typically do when they happen upon a pack of armed men); but instead it approached with an uncanny malice of intent. They stated that they had seen the hunter fire several bullets at the lion at point blank range, but to no avail. According to their testimony the lion

just kept coming and was totally unaffected by the bullets. It attacked and killed the lion-hunter.

An expert witness (a man from another ethnic group who specializes in the diagnosis of witchcraft) then came forward and performed an autopsy on the dead body, carefully inspecting the intestines and searching for a particular configuration of markings that is the sign of a death caused by witchcraft. He made a positive diagnosis.

Further testimony was then introduced revealing that the lion-hunter's wife had been having sexual liaisons with another man, who I will refer to as Ngugi. That testimony also indicated that Ngugi, who was the prime suspect in the case, was envious of the lion-hunter and was known to harbor a good deal of ill-will towards him. Ngugi himself was nowhere to be found – he had disappeared right around the time of the death. Nevertheless, despite his physical absence at the time of the trial, his (apparently very guilty) soul was accused of leaving his body while he was asleep, assuming the form of a witch-lion and committing the murder. *In absentia*, he was convicted of witchcraft.

This kind of case (involving witch hunts, witchcraft accusations and witch trials) has received a fair amount of attention among anthropologists (and historians). Based on what we know about the social facts associated with witchcraft, one could come up with an even thicker example. Imagine if Ngugi himself had stepped forward at the trial, and had confessed his transgression, fully convinced of his own guilt. Imagine that he had admitted that indeed he did hate the lion-hunter, that he was sleeping with his wife, that he had wished him dead, and that given the evidence presented during the trial (a lion who attacks unprovoked and is invulnerable to bullets, the tell-tale signs on the intestine of the deceased, his own malevolent thoughts and hostile desires), it seemed beyond doubt to him that his soul, wandering while he was asleep (or perhaps even while day-dreaming), had been the cause of the death. Imagine that he had offered to pay compensation to the kinsmen of the dead man. Witchcraft confessions of that sort (attained without torture) are not uncommon in societies in which witchcraft, witchcraft accusations and witchcraft tribunals are institutional facts.

In the actual case at hand, Ngugi had not come forward with a witchcraft confession; instead he had run away. The trial was held without him and the evidence against him was presented to three judges: two respected members of the local community and the resident anthropologist. Eventually, the time came for a vote. In the minds of the two local members of the tribunal, who knew 'what really counts as what' in the world of witch hunts, the case seemed easy, a 'slam dunk' and a 'no brainer', and they voted for witchcraft. After seeing two votes cast in favor of a witchcraft conviction, the hard-nosed scientific anthropologist made it unanimous, although he was quite conflicted and uneasy about affirming a witchcraft accusation. As it turned out he was not really a member of their interpretive community and did not really share their sense of what is real. But he figured that at that point in the proceeding his vote did not really matter; so he voted for witchcraft. Some time later he told his friend (the headman) that he did not really think the lion-hunter had been killed by a witch, and that in his opinion the lion-hunter's 'luck' had just run out. The headman responded with incredulity and incomprehension, recounting the overwhelming case against Ngugi. He then assured his hard-nosed American friend that if he ever found him dead under such hostile, uncanny and suspicious circumstances, he would find the witch and never say 'I guess my friend's luck just ran out'.

But how would John Searle have voted (given his theory of social facts) if he had been on that tribunal and why? In the face (or light) of the testimony presented at the trial, how would he have responded (and justified his response) to the two other members of the tribunal if they had put to him the question: 'Is Ngugi guilty of witchcraft in the case of the dead lion-hunter?' Would he have said something like this: Communal consensus makes witches and witchcraft real. I understand that in this community witchcraft is a social fact and witches, witch hunts and witch trials are institutional facts. According to my very own theory of social ontology, all symbolically capable mental beings (including all normal human beings) are able to see and think at a double level and impose meaning (semantic content) on physical facts, just as you have. So I vote with you, because it's 'X counts as Y in context C', all the way down to those little markings on the intestines of the dead lion-hunter; and also because (for members of your community?) answering the question, 'is Ngugi guilty of witchcraft in the case of the dead lion-hunter?', is basically like answering (for members of my community?) a question about whether a touchdown was scored in a football game, or whether some piece of paper is a \$20 bill.

Or, alternatively, would he have said something like this: I think you have a bit too much confidence in the power of intentional states to actually make things happen in the physical world. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that anyone really knows how mind is able to move matter or how or why consciousness even plays a part in the material world. And I grant you that when it comes to institutional facts (such as the existence of this tribunal with its powers to convict people of witchcraft) and the status functions of your society (such as the social role of a 'witch'), collectively thinking it so makes it so. But I know at least this for sure. Hostile or even murderous thoughts do not in and of themselves cause murderous events to happen. Souls don't travel; only bodies do. The idea of a 'witch-lion' that is invulnerable to bullets is absurd. And people don't die because of witchcraft. So yes, Ngugi is a witch. And yes, he is guilty of witchcraft in the case of the dead lion-hunter. And yes, this is indeed a witchcraft tribunal. Your institutional social facts are all in order. But, the lion-hunter is not dead because of Ngugi's witchcraft. Unlike you, I am able to be objective and step outside of your local web of social facts. Read my lips: some of your basic non-institutional social facts, for example, your collective belief in the power of Ngugi's intentional states to kill the lion-hunter, are just wrong. And if you are wrong about *that* then your entire set of institutional facts associated with witchery is irrational, or at the very least, unjustifiable and illegitimate. In fact I should not be on this tribunal at all. But here I am – so I vote 'no'. The lion-hunter is dead because his luck ran out!

Or would he have said something more like this: Okay, I vote 'yes'. Ngugi is a witch (that's just an institutional social fact) and he is guilty of witchcraft in the case of the lion-hunter (his record of prior and concurrent socially harmful intentional states and hostile behaviors towards the lion-hunter fit the 'X counts as Y in context C' formula). But don't get me wrong. I know (and I am guessing that deep down inside you know too) that people don't die because of witchcraft. But let's keep that objective truth a secret among ourselves, because these witchcraft tribunals and inquiries into the cause of a death serve a very useful social function. Ngugi really does have it coming and it is only fair that he get what he deserves. He should be convicted, ordered to pay compensation to the lion-hunter's kinsmen and to repair his relationship with everyone

in our community. Where would we be as a viable community without such necessary illusions?

CARING FOR THE DEAD

I plan to say a bit more about interpretations of the witch case and much more about the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of John Searle's theory of social ontology. First, however, allow me to present one more illustration of the anthropological encounter with forms of life different from one's own, which will later be grist for a conceptual mill. Here I briefly describe an encounter of the type I have frequently had in my research in comparative ethics and on moral reasoning in the Hindu temple town of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India (Shweder et al., 1990; also see Shweder et al., 2003).

'The day after his father's death the first-born son had a haircut and ate chicken'. To members of my own interpretive community (and probably yours too) the conduct described in that sentence is not particularly noteworthy and is certainly not immoral. Yet in the judgment of men and women in the interpretive community surrounding the Hindu temple where I do research in India, a first-born son having a haircut and eating chicken the day after his father's death is categorized as a 'great sin' (*mahapapa*). Being a great sin, the conduct is not only scandalous and a departure from local social norms but is also perceived as a profound and consequential violation of the natural and objective moral ordering of things (of which the human social order, when properly functioning, is but a part). It is anticipated that the conduct will be profoundly consequential and that bad things will happen to anyone who commits a great sin. The anticipated consequences have nothing to do with secular criminal sanctions (there are none for this type of case) and go well beyond the effects on one's reputation in the local community (although reputation effects can be massive, including shunning from all forms of exchange, such as marriage arrangements, and, at least in the past, the risk of becoming an 'outcaste'). That particular 'transgression' – getting a haircut and eating chicken the day after your father's death – was the single most serious form of misconduct of any investigated in my research, and it was judged to be an even more egregious moral error than the refusal of doctors at a hospital to treat a poor man who was seriously hurt in an accident, but was too poor to pay.

Given what I have just reported, one can easily imagine some member of my own interpretive community (or even, perhaps, the reader of this essay) asking: What type of moral cretins are those Oriya Hindus? I imagine that the person posing that question assumes a presumptive ecumenical stance and may even believe that moral facts are universal brute facts. He or she would be thinking, 'Why can't those Oriya Hindus see that there is absolutely nothing wrong with having a haircut and eating chicken the day after your father dies?'

My own assumption in this instance is that getting a haircut and eating chicken are social facts of some sort or other in both interpretive communities, but different social facts; and that it is extremely hazardous (indeed it is the dismal, invaliding and invalid form of epistemic subjectivity) to stand outside a form of life different from our own and experience and react to it as if it were our own. In what follows I will try, however briefly and inadequately, to step inside a form of life different from our own, and thereby achieve a more valid form of epistemic subjectivity. (This is the type of epistemic subjectivity that children achieve when they go through that process of learning how to

understand things that is called 'socialization'.) Here is my explanation for why the conduct in question is a social fact of a very different sort for Oriya Hindus than for most American observers.

Oriya Hindus, or at least most of those who live in the interpretive community I studied, believe that every person has an immortal reincarnating soul. They believe that when a person dies his or her soul wants to go on its transmigratory journey but is initially trapped in the corpse and held back by the 'death pollution' that emanates from the dead body and from its subsequently processed physical remains. As an act of beneficence, care, and reciprocity (all of which are assumed to be objective moral goods), relatives of the deceased (and especially the first-born son, for whom this is a major institutionalized moral obligation in life) undertake the project of assisting the soul of the dead person and enabling it to get free of its ties to the physical form it once occupied. Thus, some of the kinsmen of the dead person turn their own living bodies into what I shall label 'death pollution collection sites', and essentially suck up the death pollution associated with the corpse (and its cremation and disposal) into themselves. They believe that the most effective way to do this is by keeping all other types of pollution away from their living bodies, thus providing maximal space for the personal intake of the death pollution. Among the most commonplace competing types of pollution that might interfere with their project are sexual activities and the ingestion of 'hot foods' (for example, fish and meat – the local classification of all ingested substances on a hot versus cool dimension would need to be spelled out here, but the relevant social fact is that chicken is a 'hot food'). Thus for 12 days they stay at home fasting (maintaining a very restricted diet of 'cool' foods) and abstinent. On the 12th day they believe the soul of the deceased has been released from its bond to its bygone material form and is free to go on its journey to the world of transmigrating spirits. On that 12th day they cleanse themselves of the death pollution, which they have absorbed into their own bodies and which has accumulated there. They believe that the pollution migrates to the extremities of the body, and is especially concentrated in their hair and under their fingernails. On that 12th day of abstinence and fasting the family barber cuts off all their hair and the barber's wife cuts their fingernails. Then they take a ceremonial bath and go back to the workaday world, having fulfilled their moral obligation to the soul of the deceased.

'The day after his father's death the first-born son had a haircut and ate chicken!' To any Oriya Hindu in the temple town that conduct signals a willful and horrifying renunciation of the entire project of assisting the soul of your father and places the father's spiritual transmigration in deep jeopardy. No wonder they are morally distraught at the very idea of such behavior, and judge it more severely than not treating the accident victim at the hospital, who is too poor to pay. Wouldn't you judge things that way too if that was your picture of the natural and moral order of things (including the world of moral values and of social relationships, viewed as part of the natural moral order of things)?

Later I will pose the question of whether (within the bounds of what it means for human beings to be rational and moral) a group of human beings might reasonably feel bound by that picture of the natural and moral order of things. Here I will simply conclude this second illustration of forms of life different from our own by asking the reader, which do you think is the worse transgression: (a) a doctor not treating an accident victim because he is too poor to pay or (b) a son tossing his father's dead body

in a trash compacter and holding no funeral service or memorial at all [this example is a weak analogue of the Oriya Hindu case]? Personally, I think they are both serious moral errors, but it is 'b' that is the more horrifying transgression; and I don't think it is merely communal consensus that makes me think so. But what precisely is it that makes me think so?

Nor do I think that the meaning of the idea of a 'great sin' or 'moral error' is adequately translated when it is theorized and described in 'conventionalist (or positive law terms) or in terms of social sanctions or pressures toward conformity. If cultural anthropologists have learned anything from the legacy of Emile Durkheim it is that from a 'native point of view' the social order is thought to be part of the natural moral order of things; and thus when someone says 'you have committed a moral error' or 'you have sinned', they do not simply mean that some collection of subjectivities in their interpretive community has decided that 'X counts as Y in context C'. The natural moral order of things is something you discover (or have revealed to you), not something you invent, or at least that is the near universal consensus among the 'natives' of the world.

Speaking of the 'natives' of the world, Stephen Lukes has documented some of the early responses to Emile Durkheim's account of social facts on the occasion of the publication of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and, as Lukes points out, Durkheim's account was criticized (and for good reason I think) right from the start (Lukes, 1985: 507–29). Back then, and ever since, objections have been raised to personifying the abstract notion of a society and writing about it as if it had a will and desires of its own. Right from the get-go Durkheim was criticized for attributing God-like properties to social forces (as if truth and goodness and the categories of thought were constituted ex nihilo by the social will and were thus beyond criticism). He was criticized for thinking that some variety of social experience per se (social pressure, the excitement of gathering in a group or a crowd, the conformity sustaining forces of 'mechanical solidarity') could fully explain the universal human apprehension that one has sacred obligations to things greater than oneself whose authority derives from some kind of connection to divine and transcendental beings or objects.

Nevertheless, whatever the inadequacies in Durkheim's proposed solution, the problem he addressed remains: at least some social facts (and associated institutionalized practices, such as 'death pollution' and 'witchcraft') are experienced as having an objective reality – binding (and moral) transcendental power that is not captured by the notion that they exist only because we (collectively) think they exist or because we have entered into a communal agreement to count X as Y in context C. The beliefs, goals and values associated with such practices are *experienced* as true, valid and justified; and the power they have to create in us a sense of obligation is, at least in part, based on the *assumption* that there is far more to social facts than the projection, reification and collective endorsement of our own subjectivity. (Thus, in one sense, the expression 'inter-subjectivity' suggests two or more subjects/persons, each endowed with the capacity for intentional consciousness [including rationality], who grasp the same objective or transcendent realities, and collectively expect their shared picture of what is true, good, beautiful and efficient to be made manifest and upheld in practice; which is not a bad definition of 'a culture'.) It is certainly possible to interpret all social facts from a metaphysical stance that presupposes that such experiences are illusory and that the assumption is false. The tradition of pluralistic anthropology (of the sort I practice),

however, adopts a somewhat different metaphysical stance, which I shall try to outline later.

A THICKET OF DISTINCTIONS: JOHN SEARLE'S SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Before I summarize John Searle's view of social facts, react to some of his conclusions and return to the cases of witchcraft and death pollution, I wish to emphasize that there are many points made in his essay that I consider sound and uncontroversial, for example, with regard to institutional facts, his claim that 'We have the capacity to count things as having a certain status, and in virtue of the collective acceptance of that status, they can perform functions that they could not perform without that collective acceptance' (p. 20); or his related notion that '... the forms of the status function in question are almost invariably matters of deontic powers . . . rights, duties, obligations, responsibilities and so on' (p. 20). Of course this is not really news to most anthropologists. I doubt there are many anthropologists or sociologists who would disagree with the remark, made in 1957, by S.F. Nadel in his book *The Theory of Social Structure* (1957: 20–1).

It should be stated, first of all, that the role concept is not an invention of anthropologists or sociologists but is employed by the very people they study. No society exists which does not in this sense classify its population – into fathers, priests, servants, doctors . . . in accordance with the jobs, offices, or functions which individuals assume and the responsibilities or entitlements which fall to them; in short every society gives such linguistic notice of the differential parts individuals are expected (or 'briefed') to play. What anthropologists and sociologists have done over and above recognizing the existence of this categorization has been to turn it into a special analytic tool. Its usefulness, in simplest terms, lies in the fact that it provides a concept intermediary between 'society' and 'individual'. It operates in that strategic area where individual behaviour becomes social conduct, and where the qualities and inclinations distributed over a population are translated into differential attributes required by or exemplifying the obtaining social norms. That this is a strategic area need not be especially emphasized; a great deal of sociological and social-psychological work deals with this crucial transition or translation. Nor is it difficult to show the need for such an intermediary concept. We have already anticipated the logical gap which it is meant to bridge. Societies, though they are always composed of individuals, are not, strictly speaking, reducible to or divisible into individuals. For as we have said, societies rest on rules or norms and, consequently, on constancies of behaviour of various kinds, which we know as institutions or institutionalized modes of action, relationships, and groupings, and which we can further analyze into the constituent tasks, goals, expectations, rights and duties, and the like. All these, though they are exhibited in the behaviour (or conduct) of concrete individuals, are also independent of them.

So there is much in John Searle's article that is not controversial among anthropologists (and also will not be read as news), including his discussions of the dual structure of language, the nature of (what Ferdinand De Saussure called) the linguistic sign, and

the powers and capacities inherent in human mental and symbolic functioning. Some anthropologists who are well-read in intellectual history may be dubious about his claim that theoretical recognition of the constitutive powers of language is a necessary precondition for the development of a theory of institutional facts. For example, they might point out that S.F. Nadel's work on role structures, statuses and briefs and the institutional side of social life builds on the rich tradition of British social anthropology, a tradition that had much to say about institutional facts but very little to say about linguistics or the philosophy of language; although he, the British school of anthropology, and all the others who worked on social role theory – from Pareto to Parsons – certainly knew what it meant for behaviors or objects to be signs or symbols and to have meanings and qualitative values over and above their nature as physical or quantitative things.

Be that as it may, John Searle's definition of social facts does demand and deserve close attention by anthropologists (and that is true whether his theory of social ontology is new or not). In what follows I try (however fitfully, partially or inadequately) to think through his conceptual scheme and re-examine my own. After clarifying some terms and reacting to some of his distinctions I then return to the question: In what sense, if any, are social facts (for example, those associated with witchcraft and death pollution) real, valid and intelligible?

What makes a social fact a fact?

According to Searle (this issue) a social fact is 'any fact involving collective intentionality of two or more human or animal agents' (p. 17). Intentionality refers to the quality of being mental, in the sense of wanting something, believing something, valuing something, intending to do something; it refers roughly to what Plato called 'the states of the soul'. Collective intentionality, which is presumably that which makes a social fact *social*, refers to a situation where different people share the same wants, beliefs, values and aims. It is John Searle's position that social facts (or, at the very least, that sub-set of social facts he calls institutional facts, for example, football games and touchdowns) are nothing other than artifacts of the collective intentions of mentally and linguistically equipped members of particular groups, where membership in the particular group is premised on an implicit assumption that one is party to an agreement that 'X counts as Y in context C'. As he notes: 'there is no phenomenon there other than the brute facts and their representation as having an institutional status' (p. 19). According to his theory of social ontology, social facts are facts that do not exist independently of the mental states of beings who have the symbolic capacity to represent things as such (for example, as a 'touchdown' or as a '\$20 bill') and to imagine and impose a semantic content – for example, a status ('tight end') and associated deontic powers (the right to catch a 'forward pass' in the 'end zone' and 'score a touchdown') – on those processes, events and objects that are brute facts in the material or physical world. The obvious question then arises, what makes a social fact a *fact*?

As far I can judge, John Searle gives two types of answers to that question, both of which invite a response. The first type of answer, which seems profoundly relativistic, is ontological. It asserts that any intentional state becomes a social *fact* if some group of people (or non-human animals with a mental capacity) thinks it so; which leaves one wondering if there is any way within the terms of John Searle's theory of social ontology

to distinguish social facts that are valid and/or moral from those that are invalid (or even delusional) and/or immoral. Clifford Geertz once remarked: 'Relativism disables judgment', while 'absolutism removes it from history' (Geertz, 2001: 72). John Searle's first type of answer – a social fact is a fact if collective consensus says it is so – appears to be disabling in precisely that sort of way.

The second type of answer appeals to the notion of epistemic objectivity. Now at this point I want to note that John Searle is a philosophical monist and a materialist, who is fully committed to the view that the objective world (in the ontological sense) is made up entirely of physical particles in fields of force. Searle's philosophical materialism is relevant here because, if I understand him correctly, it is his view that social facts are not facts in the sense of being ontologically objective things. And they are not ontologically objective things precisely because they are not (just) material or physical things, such as diamonds (in the rough), neurons, or DNA. As a matter of fact they do not exist, he argues, independently of our representation of them. So in what sense then are they facts?

Here things get a little tricky, but, if I understand him correctly, social facts are said to be facts largely because (he thinks) they have an observer-independent identifiable ontological status as particular kinds of non-objective things. In other words, a distinctive feature of John Searle's conception of social facts (that which makes them *facts*) is his claim that *epistemic* objectivity can be achieved for statements about things that do not exist from no point of view, that is, about things that have no reality independently of the perspective and shared intentionality of members of some particular interpretive community. He believes that epistemic objectivity can be achieved for statements about things that are not themselves *ontologically* objective.

Thus, I take him to mean by a fact any statement that bears the mark of epistemic objectivity, that is to say, the truth of the statement can be ascertained independent of attitudes, beliefs, or methods of investigation that are specific to the members of any particular interpretive community. He believes that epistemic objectivity can be achieved for such statements as 'the piece of paper I have in my hand is a \$20 bill' or 'George W. Bush is the president of the United States of America' (and presumably he believes epistemic objectivity can be achieved for such philosophically monistic and materialistic statements as 'the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force'). The conceptual setup of the essay (which was informative even if complex) left me wondering whether he would also claim that epistemic objectivity can be achieved for statements such as 'Ngugi is the witch who killed the lion-hunter' or 'By having my hair cut and eating chicken the day after my father's death I have committed a great sin.' If not, why not? And if epistemic objectivity is not the mark that makes a social fact a fact then what is? Does the notion of a social *fact* ultimately rest on that relativistic (and consensually subjectivist) ontology in which collectively thinking it so makes it so?

Whatever John Searle's answer to those questions, an indispensable feature of his general theory of social ontology is his distinction between epistemic objectivity and ontological objectivity, and his claim that epistemic objectivity and ontological objectivity need not go hand in hand. He not only distinguishes ontologically objective things (things that exist independently of our understanding, representation or explanation of them, such as neurons or physical particles in fields of force) from ontologically subjective things (things that do not exist independently of our experience and mental

involvement with them, such as the quality of being a 'touchdown'). He goes on to argue that epistemic objectivity can be achieved for both types of things. He embraces the view that statements can be formulated about 'touchdowns' and 'citizenship' and '\$20 bills' (and 'witches' and 'great sins' too?) whose truth value is in no way dependent on the intentional states and the methods of understanding specific to particular communities of observers. He states, 'In a word, epistemic objectivity does not require ontological objectivity. If it did, the social sciences would be impossible' (p. 15).

It was at this juncture in John Searle's argument that I found myself re-examining my own philosophical assumptions about the practice of pluralistic anthropology. In what follows I hazard a somewhat different account of what it means for forms of life different from our own to be real, valid and intelligible. I am going to suggest that while epistemology can (and must) be distinguished from ontology (in my view the conflation of ontology and epistemology is a major weakness in the skeptical postmodern literature), there *is* nevertheless a close connection between epistemic and ontological objectivity, at least in the physical sciences (where the real things of real interest are material things). And I am going to suggest (a) that epistemic objectivity is not achievable for social facts; and (b) that social facts are possible to grasp and understand nonetheless precisely because they are ontologically real (even if they are not just or necessarily material things). If 'a' and 'b' are both true it suggests to me that research in (what I shall dub) the 'unphysical sciences' makes use of methods, procedures and ways of knowing that are not exactly the same as those in the physical sciences. In the physical sciences without epistemic objectivity nothing is ever said to be real; and the objects of interest are in principle public and available not just to the imagination but for observation across multiple and very differently situated observers. In the unphysical sciences (some of which are interpretive disciplines and others formal disciplines) the real objects of study are the 'states of the soul' and the non-visible world of concepts or ideas, neither of which is available for sensory observation and for the recording of appearances across differently situated observers; and thus there must be other (or additional) ways and procedures for gaining access to what is real.

Whatever one might think of the practice of romantic pluralism in anthropology (or of the very idea of the unphysical sciences), if I were able to spell out the philosophy of the real that informs my own work I suspect I would end up with some kind of variation on Sir Karl Popper's philosophy of the three real worlds (crudely stated, the world of material things, the world of mental states and, finally, quite crucially, the world of ideas or concepts – the later conjectured to be a somewhat observer-independent realm of intellectual/unphysical objects that human beings are able to discover and grasp by means of their mental powers). In his philosophy of the real Popper (Popper and Eccles, 1977: 36–50) conjectures that besides physical objects and states ('World 1') there are mental states ('World 2') 'and that these states are real since they interact with our bodies' (here he is prepared to just assume the reality of mental causation, which always requires a good deal of question begging). Popper also conjectures that the content of our mental states (the ideas or concepts that we think with or about) form part of what he calls World 3. The intellectual objects in World 3 are not themselves mental states, yet are real, in part, because they seem to have something like an observer-independent status as objects of discovery (for example, mathematical truths are neither physical nor mental but they are real), and also, in part, because the ideas or concepts that we are able to

grasp by means of our mental powers can ultimately have an effect on our bodies and on the creation of material artifacts.

The details of Popper's three-world philosophy of the real need not concern us here, and there is much in his formulation that I think is problematic and debatable. And I have no idea whether he would welcome my conjecture that even the idea or concept of a 'touchdown' (or of a 'citizen') exists in an observer-independent realm of intellectual or unphysical objects and is available for mental beings to grasp or discover and to selectively instantiate or make manifest in the acts and artifacts of some form of life. Nevertheless his three-world metaphysics is a philosophical conjecture about what is real that bears a striking resemblance to the common-sense of the diverse peoples of the world studied by anthropologists, which is not a bad starting point when one is trying to develop some analytic tools for making sense of folk mentalities and forms of life different from ones own. Later I will try to say a bit more about this kind of ontological pluralism. But first, I want to explain why I hesitate to embrace John Searle's separation of epistemic objectivity from ontological objectivity, and why I think the two types of objectivity are closely linked.

Epistemic and ontological objectivity: connected or unconnected?

Thomas Nagel makes the following two arguments, which lead me to conclude that there is a connection between epistemic and ontological objectivity.

The first argument is this:

If there is a way things really are [I take this to index John Searle's notion of ontological objectivity – for example, the way physical particles in fields of force really are], which explains their diverse appearances to differently constituted and situated observers, then it is most accurately apprehended by methods not specific to particular types of observers. That is why scientific measurement interposes between us and the world instruments whose interactions with the world are of a kind that could be detected by a creature not sharing the human senses. Objectivity [I take this to index John Searle's notion of epistemic objectivity] requires not only a departure from one's individual viewpoint, but also, as far as possible, departure from a specifically human or even mammalian viewpoint. The idea is that if one can still maintain some view when one relies less and less on what is specific to one's position or form, it will be truer to reality. (Nagel, 1979: 196)

The second argument is this:

There is a tendency to seek an objective account of everything before admitting its reality. But often what appears to a more subjective point of view cannot be accounted for this way. So either the objective conception of the world is incomplete, or the subjective involves illusions that should be rejected. (p. 196)

I find Nagel's arguments helpful for a couple of reasons. For one thing they elucidate a very good reason for resisting any attempt to separate epistemic objectivity from ontological objectivity. If epistemic objectivity amounts to achieving maximal distance from the perspective of any particular intentional being or group of intentional beings, then

what remains after you achieve it is a picture of the way things really are as ontologically objective things. And, vice versa, if something is an ontologically objective thing then its real nature can only be known by distancing oneself from the perspective of any particular intentional being or group of intentional beings (hence avoiding what psychologists call method effects, what historians of science call paradigm effects, what theologians call matters of faith, and all other forms of epistemic subjectivity).

Secondly, Nagel's arguments focus a light on a distinctive aspect of John Searle's theory of social ontology. There are philosophers who accept the connection between epistemic objectivity and ontological objectivity, who believe that ontologically subjective states and events do not meet the epistemic test, and have therefore concluded that 'the subjective [including even the direct experience of one's self and of mental causation, which are fundamental experiences for all normal intentional beings] involves illusions that should be rejected' (Nagel, 1979: 196–214). And there are philosophers who accept the connection between epistemic objectivity and ontological objectivity, who believe that ontologically subjective states and events do not meet the epistemic test, and have therefore concluded that the objective conception of the world is incomplete, precisely because it is incapable of admitting the reality of social facts and human intentional states; it is that latter conclusion that I am raising for consideration in this article.

John Searle's article is provocative and fascinating to read in part because he appears to reject both of those conclusions. He does not believe that 'the subjective involves illusions that should be rejected', nor does he think that 'the objective conception of the world is incomplete' (except in the philosophically trivial sense that the world of physical particles and material processes is complex and much more work still needs to be done to understand it). Instead he asserts the reality of social facts, which he does by assuming a stance that denies Nagel's empirical premise that 'what appears to a more subjective point of view cannot be accounted for this way [i.e. by seeking a "nowhere in particular" objective epistemic point of view]'. Thus the stance John Searle assumes ultimately rests on the (sound enough) analytic point that epistemic objectivity does not logically require ontological objectivity plus some type of empirical demonstration that the way social facts really are (as social facts) can be pictured or represented from an objective point of view, that is to say, without any involvement in the perspective of any particular group of intentional human beings.

If that is his claim, I find it strange, even paradoxical. One awaits the relevant demonstration. For example, how does one intelligibly represent the reality (and assess the validity) of that African witchcraft tribunal or the death pollution practices of Oriya Hindus (and their notion of a 'great sin') while relying *only* on sentences that are objective from an epistemic point of view? Writing, as John Searle does, for an audience of readers who already speak his language (not only the English language but also, for example, the language of 'football' or of 'money' or of 'citizenship') and are already of his culture, and then asking of them 'isn't it true that the piece of paper in my hand is a \$20 bill' is not a demonstration of epistemic objectivity. Rather, it seems more like a demonstration that writer and reader share a 'native' or 'local' point of view; and that both have (somehow – one wants to know, how?) successfully grasped something that is specific to that point of view, yet intelligible nonetheless. If it were an objective statement (in the epistemic sense) then any reasonable human being, whether an American philosopher or the headman of a remote African village, should be able to judge whether

it is true or false. It seems to me that either you are inside John Searle's 'native point of view' or you are outside it; and when you are outside it there is no neutral place to stand. Or, more accurately, the only neutral place to stand (an appeal to logic and brute facts and abstract universal concepts) is typically an insufficient foundation for understanding the meaning and appraising the validity of forms of life different from one's own.

Reality testing is a metaphysical act, so be very careful when you pick your philosophy of the real

I confess to being doubtful that a statement such as 'the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force' attains the status of epistemic objectivity. I am doubtful in the same way about the opposite (subjective idealist's?) statement that 'there is no reality aside from human consciousness, because all sensory experiences and representations of reality (including representations picturing an independently existing reality) are states of consciousness, and hence the world consists entirely of human intentional states'. I have come to this conclusion by reading and watching brilliant philosophers at work and noticing that over a very long period of time there has been no convergence among rational thinkers in their philosophy of the real. Materialism is a grand tradition in philosophy. But it is only one tradition among several; and one explanation for the diversity of philosophical traditions is that a statement such as 'the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force' is not an objective statement from an epistemic point of view. It is a conviction, an article of philosophical faith. And I see no reason to think it is the best or most useful faith for the practice of an anthropology whose aim is to describe 'the reality, validity and human intelligibility of values and forms of life very different from our own'.

Not too many years ago I received an invitation to attend an interdisciplinary conference to further our understanding of voluntary action (for example, aiming to raise your hand and then doing so). The invitation included the following summary of the state of the art (see Shweder, 2003; also Maasen et al., 2003):

Voluntary action poses a severe challenge to scientific attempts to form a unitary picture of the working of the human mind and its relation to the working of the body. This is because the notion of mental causation, inherent in the received standard view of voluntary action, is difficult to reconcile with both dualist and monist approaches to the mental and the physical. For dualist accounts it has to be explained what a causal interaction between mind and matter means and how it is possible at all. Conversely for monist approaches the question of mental causation does not arise and therefore appears to denote a cognitive illusion at best. Dualist and monist approaches can be found in all the disciplines mentioned above [philosophy, cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, ethnology], albeit in different phrasings and/or theoretical frameworks. Moreover, in virtually all disciplines this seemingly insurmountable opposition is a subject of ongoing debate.

Needless to say the state of the art did not change dramatically as a result of that conference, although each of the brilliantly disputatious philosophers present was very good at critiquing the assumptions in every conceivable philosophical account of voluntary action, except their own. This type of clash of philosophical traditions has

been going on for a very long time; perhaps for 2500 years. So it is not surprising that the contemporary state of the art is not all that different from what it was in 1913 when Emile Durkheim presented his paper on 'The Religious Problem and the Duality of Nature' to the Société de Philosophie. It is a famous paper, summarizing the philosophical implications of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (see Lukes, 1985: 506–7). As Stephen Lukes notes, alluding to the apparent dualisms and oppositions that were up for discussion at Durkheim's talk (dualisms such as body versus soul, physical versus mental, sensation versus conceptual thought, profane versus sacred): 'Philosophers had no genuine solution: empiricists, materialists and utilitarians, on the one hand, and absolute idealists on the other, simply denied these antinomies without accounting for them; ontological dualists simply reaffirmed them without explaining them'. In my view, that is pretty much the way it has always been and still is today.

Nevertheless, having said that, I am not entirely sure how to classify John Searle's position in that regard, for he seems to be on both sides of the fence. If you are a monist and a materialist who believes that the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force (as he does), one might expect that you would be led to the conclusion that intentional states such as 'aiming to raise your hand' or 'concluding that Ngugi is the witch who killed the lion-hunter' or 'anticipating that bad things will happen because you have committed a great sin' would be epiphenomena; one might expect a thoroughgoing materialist who believes that we live in nothing other than a material world to claim that therefore mental states are illusions and have no role to play in the chain of real ontologically objective physical events (for example, neural firings) that cause other physical things to move and behave the way they do. Yet John Searle clearly believes in mental causation. He does not tell us how (for example) voluntary motor movements (deciding to raise your hand, and then doing it) could take place given that mental states are not ontologically objective things and motor movements are; but no one can tell you that. Nor does he really tell us why his stance is not dualistic (thinking it so really makes it so for social facts, he argues, but not for brute facts), except for stating (this issue) that he is 'confident that collective intentionality is a genuine biological phenomenon, and though it is complex, it is not mysterious or inexplicable' (p. 16). I confess that, reading John Searle's essay, I could not always tell whether he was affirming or denying an ontological dualism in human nature between intentionality and materiality, mind and body, individual mental states and collective social facts, socially shared opinion and moral truth. It seems to me his general philosophical position (monism and materialism) produces real paradoxes for someone who argues that 'social reality exists only because we think it exists' and who wants to establish the reality of things (such as touchdowns) that he believes do not exist independently of the subjectivity of the members of particular human communities. If these ontologically subjective states are also genuinely biological (hence material or physical), are they then not also ontologically objective things? I suppose one can assert that social facts are both ontologically objective and ontologically subjective at the same time, but that type of statement would appear to present some logical problems for a philosophical monist, and given that John Searle is a monist (and a materialist), it leaves me a little baffled and wondering whether a materialist can really have it both ways.

If one believes that mental causation is real, not illusory (as John Searle does; and as all normal humans do), then it would seem to follow that either (a) our current

scientific account of the nature of the material world is incomplete, precisely because we do not know how to explain mental causation within the current terms of our material sciences; or (b) there is more to reality than just the material world (for example, Plato's 'states of the soul' and the realm of concepts or ideas, that is, Popper's three-world ontologically pluralistic philosophy of the real). John Searle opts for '(a)' with his eyes open, which amounts to a denial of any fundamental division between the physical and the mental, although those two realms sure do seem pretty different by his own account. (As for the realm of concepts or ideas, I assume that Searle thinks that the intellectual objects of our intentional states do not exist in some observer-independent realm or so-called Platonic heaven, and can be subsumed within the realm of the mental, which will one day be shown to be contained within the realm of the physical.)

My own working view is different. Given that this response to John Searle's essay is (in part) an exercise in trying to be self-conscious about some philosophical foundations for the practice of romantic pluralism in anthropology, it seems to me that if you are a romantic pluralist you ought to opt for '(b)'. I realize, of course, that by selecting that option one ends up just reaffirming the division between physical matter and other types of real things ('states of the soul', concepts or ideas) without explaining it. But that is my view of the state of the art: deny the difference without accounting for it or affirm the difference without explaining it.

Clearly then I do not mean to suggest that I can propose a general philosophy of the real that will be any less baffling than either materialist philosophies that deny the reality of mental causation altogether or those (such as John Searle's) which seem to suggest that the entire world is physical, yet when it comes to that region of the physical called 'collective intentionality', thinking it so makes it so. The best I can do is try to be slightly more specific about the kind of philosophical stance – for example, some variation on Popper's three-world philosophy of the real – that helps me understand what I think I am doing when I try to understand and assess the validity of forms of life different from my own. In order to do that it will be helpful to return to our two illustrations and ask, in what sense and to what extent, if any, are the social facts (including institutional facts) associated with African witchcraft trails and Hindu death pollution practices real, valid and intelligible?

THE RETURN OF NGUGI

I would like to imagine that when Ngugi ran away (presumably fully convinced of his own guilt in the case of the dead lion-hunter) he got on a plane to England, where he became a student, took courses at Oxford and Cambridge, and was exposed to the full range of anthropological and philosophical ideas that circulate around the campus of great universities in Europe and the United States. I would like to imagine him becoming a practicing anthropologist (of the romantic pluralist variety) with an interest in doing an anthropological field study of witch hunts and witchcraft tribunals in Africa.

I am now going to conjure two anthropological spirits, Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Ernest Gellner. They both died some years ago yet they seem very real to those who practice that form of life called cultural anthropology. So I envision Ngugi seeking counsel from Evans-Pritchard, who wrote a seminal ethnographic monograph about what it is like to hunt for a witch in Central Africa (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), and receiving this advice: 'You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent, conversation

with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression you regard their belief as an illusion'. That much Ngugi would have already known, for he was an intelligent person who thought he should have good reasons for his beliefs, values and actions; and he was still convinced that he was a witch. He knew he had emitted into the atmosphere some really bad and powerful vibrations in the lion-hunter's direction – envy, ill-will, wishing him dead, an affair with his wife; although now, if truth be told, after a few years at Oxford and Cambridge, he was pretty puzzled by one thing. Precisely how, Ngugi often wondered, did those bad and powerful 'vibes' actually work their evil and produce a witch-lion to kill the lion-hunter. But then again, after a few years at Oxford and Cambridge, he found himself puzzled by a lot of things, like precisely how his own consciousness was able to make his hand rise, or whether in fact it did. The really real (the actual mechanism by which envy can kill or mind can move matter), he figured, could only be partially understood; perhaps it was either too complex or too mysterious for mere human understanding to wrap up in a ball.

I also envision Ngugi seeking counsel from Ernest Gellner. Gellner was a witty (and unrelenting) critic of Ludwig Wittgenstein and of the theory of the social origin of concepts (and both were the targets of Gellner's memorable quips: 'My form of life, right or wrong'; 'It is communal consensus which makes addition'; 'The soft porn of irrationalism'). Undoubtedly Gellner would have made it very clear to Ngugi how he would have voted in the case of the dead lion-hunter. In his critique (1988) of what he called 'relativism' in anthropology, Gellner wrote:

What in fact [anthropologists] do is to give an account of a given society, or some of its practices, against the backcloth of our world, and not of its world. An anthropologist who would explain witchcraft beliefs and practices of a given society by saying, 'Well as a matter of fact, in their country, witchcraft works, like what they say', would simply not pass muster. If relativism genuinely were the practice in anthropology, such an explanation would not merely be possible, but mandatory. In fact, what the anthropologist does do is explain how witchcraft beliefs can function notwithstanding their falsity.

Is Ngugi a witch? Was the lion-hunter killed by witchcraft? Was Ngugi the witch who killed him? If asked such questions Ernest Gellner presumably would have said something like this. Don't be ridiculous! Witches do not exist. They are not real; and therefore the social facts (institutional or otherwise) associated with witchcraft (for example, the judgment of the tribunal that Ngugi is 'convicted of witchcraft') are invalid.

I imagine Gellner would have gone on to say something like this: In my interpretive community (the one that traces its descent to the Northern European Enlightenment) we have achieved an objective understanding (from an epistemic point of view) of how the world really works; and we know that no one dies because of witchcraft. If you and your friends think otherwise you are wrong, even if there are some practical social benefits (wealth redistribution, the repair of ruptured interpersonal relations, and an incentive to avoid the public expression of ill-will towards others) to the judicial process that is falsely legitimated by your shared delusion. Gellner would have advised Ngugi to reject the communal consensus in favor of the view that witchery is a fantasy – perhaps adding, even fantasies can have real social consequences. How would John Searle respond to Ernest Gellner? Would he reply 'right on' or 'no way'?

I can only guess what Gellner might have said about those death pollution practices of Oriya Hindus. Perhaps something like this: When you are dead you are dead! Souls don't reincarnate! In fact people don't have souls at all. I suppose they do have a 'self', but, take my word for it, your 'transcendental ego' does not go anywhere when you die and my colleagues in biology assure me that one day they will figure out the answer to the problem that Descartes was unable to solve, precisely how that 'ghost in the machine' got into our physical body in the first place. Moreover, the only kind of 'pollution' that exists in the world consists of nasty physical particles in fields of force and no one in their right mind would want to suck them into their body. Of course there are many psychological benefits (including a defense against grief, loss and the fear of death) to imagining that bodies are animated by immortal souls, which are already old souls when they enter our contemporary physical world and survive the demise of their physical form. Wouldn't it be nice if that were true, but it is not. And yes, perhaps there are social benefits to endorsing the virtues that bind the generations by enacting the moral drama of turning one's own body into a 'death pollution collection site'. But remember what Nietzsche once said: 'Asia is a dreamy place where they do not know how to distinguish between truth and poetry.' No one's soul is in jeopardy just because someone gets a haircut and eats chicken! And, by the way, there is no such thing as a 'sin'.

What lessons might we draw from such advice? I want to focus on two points: (1) Evans-Pritchard's presupposition that intelligent conversations about (for example) witchcraft do take place within many communities, and they can even take place between visiting anthropologists and their hosts; and (2) Gellner's claim that we give an account of the practices of another society against the backcloth of our world, not its world.

Intelligent conversations and the stance of justification: a method for the practice of romantic pluralism in anthropology

I want to suggest that one feature of a romantic pluralist's conception of a *genuine* culture (or authentic form of life) is that the shared goals, values, desires and pictures of the world made manifest in the acts, artifacts and customary practices of the group are at the very least compatible with reason, and are thus universally recognizable as livable manifestations of what is true, good, and beautiful. One way to assess the genuineness or authenticity of a form of life is by means of intelligent conversation between members of different societies. By an intelligent conversation I mean that all parties to the conversation (insiders and outsiders alike) are prepared to engage in reasoned criticism and are willing to assume the standpoint of justification. This is one feature – the normative use of intelligent conversation as a research method to assess the degree of genuineness of a form of life – that I believe distinguishes romantic pluralism from the more conventionalist or pure positive science schools of anthropological pluralism.

As I understand the views of conventionalists and positivists in anthropology, a major aim of ethnography is to objectively record and document regularities in the ideas and practices of peoples around the world and not to criticize or condone them; the conventionalists and positivists assume that whatever is, is, and it is not for the anthropologist to judge whether it is okay (or really true, valid or good). And since (according to conventionalists) collectively thinking it so makes it so, in most conventionalist (and

positive science) representations of forms of life different from our own something is depicted as desirable if it is desired, good if it is thought to be good and true if it is thought to be true; and the stance of justification never really reaches in to evaluate the beliefs and practices internal to a particular group, except perhaps to make note of their (intended and unintended) consequences. In contrast, the practice of romantic pluralism involves testing the genuineness of a culture by determining whether a fully rational and morally decent member of that society is able, within the bounds of universal reason, to justify that form of life to anyone who is willing to engage in the process of intelligent conversation. What then are the bounds of universal reason? And how is such a testing of genuineness to be done?

Here I will turn to Thomas Nagel once more and clarify the notion of 'the standpoint of justification', which is so central to the process of intelligent conversation. In a Lionel Trilling Lecture at Columbia University some years ago called 'Reason and Relativism', Nagel equated the standpoint of justification with what he called reason in the strict sense. He pointed out that 'a characteristic feature of reasoning is its generality', by which he meant that for reasons to be reasons 'they would have to justify anyone else [believing, valuing, or] doing the same in my place'. He argued, quite convincingly I thought and to the detriment of radical forms of subjectivism, that the standpoint of justification is incompatible with the unqualified denial of the existence of reason. In other words, there can be no justification for the unqualified denial of reason because such a justification would itself amount to having some good reasons in the justification of that argument. Nevertheless, the bounds of reason, I want to suggest, are very broad; indeed broad enough to be compatible with the institutional social facts of African witchcraft tribunals and Oriya Hindu death pollution beliefs and practices.

It seems to me, speaking as a romantic pluralist in anthropology, that I render social facts intelligible first by accepting that human beings are able to do things for reasons, and then by engaging the standpoint of justification so that I can evaluate whether someone who does things for *good* reasons *might* embrace some particular form of life. An Oriya Hindu tells me that he not going to eat fish or meat for the next 12 days. I ask him why. He responds that his father just died. I do not understand his answer and I press on. He tells me that his father has cared for him all his life and now he needs to care for his father. I do not understand his answer and I press on. He tells me that his father's soul is trapped in the materiality of its corpse and is in need of his assistance to be liberated and go on its soulful journey; he therefore must suck his father's death pollution into his own body or else his father's soul will be discontent and hover around forever. The conversation goes on. It is rich in its references to imagined moral goods (beneficence, care, reciprocity, sympathy, protection of the vulnerable, sacrifice). It is rich in its reference to means–ends connections and is based on an elaborate metaphysical picture of a reality in which, among many other things, our universe is populated with immortal souls able to retain some kind of identity as they shed their skin (so to speak) and assume a new material form.

More often than not when an anthropologist engages in an intelligent conversation of this sort he or she discovers that many of the cross-cultural differences in peoples' pictures of the world are not going to be resolvable on the basis of logic or brute facts; in other words, the differences rest not on error, ignorance or confusion but on a commitment to some proposition about the world (for example, people have souls that

transmigrate) that is 'cognitively undecidable'. More often than not the differences seem no more surmountable or objectively grounded (in the epistemic sense) than the differences between those who think that mental causation must be illusory and those who think it must be real.

I suppose that in order to understand how it is possible to engage 'others' in intelligent conversations – in particular those who terminate with a recognition that equally rational and morally motivated members of different societies can disagree about how the world works and what is of preeminent value – I need to distinguish between two types of reasons: those that are non-contingent reasons and those that are contingent reasons. Thus, one might argue, there are some reasons that are good reasons no matter what type of particular place you are in or what particular philosophical or theoretical perspective you adopt. These reasons possess a kind of absolute or non-contingent generality, an unqualified universality. They are the kinds of reasons we associate with deductive necessity, with truths that are tautological or self-evident, and with very brute facts. If P is true, then either P or Q is true is an example of such a non-contingent universal truth. Other examples come to mind: a 'murder' is a 'wrongful killing'; if justice means you should treat like cases alike and different cases differently, then it is unjust to treat like cases differently and different cases alike; a whole is greater than any of its parts; the physical distance between New York and Boston is shorter than the physical distance between New York and New Delhi. If there were no such non-contingent universal reasons the very idea of epistemic objectivity would be unimaginable and it would not be possible to have an intelligent conversation, even with oneself.

On the other hand, there are also many contingent reasons that play a part in the stance of justification by providing rational and morally decent men and women with good reasons for what they do, value and believe. They are contingent reasons in the sense that their goodness (as reasons) is place or perspective dependent; for example, they provide good reasons for an Oriya Hindu who believes that his father's soul cannot transmigrate because it is being held back by death pollution to refrain from eating chicken, or for a member of an African witchcraft tribunal who believes that 'bad vibes' can somehow cause physical harm to others to convict Ngugi of being the witch who killed the lion-hunter. In a sense they too are universal reasons: in the sense that any reasonable and morally decent person might well think or behave that way if they were in that place or pictured the world from that perspective. What these contingent reasons do not do is provide a basis for evaluating the truth of social facts ('it is a great sin to eat chicken the day after your father dies'; 'Ngugi is the witch in the case of the dead lion-hunter') independent of place or perspective. That is one reason that epistemic objectivity is not achievable in the representation of social facts (including institutional facts). Social facts (including institutional facts) are always embedded in and justified by local beliefs (or are themselves local beliefs); and those beliefs typically take the form of contingent rather than non-contingent reasons.

'Our world': what is its backcloth?

There is a second reason why I do not think epistemic objectivity is attainable in our representations of forms of life different from our own. It is because I think one must grant the validity of Gellner's epistemological claim that any anthropologist's

representation of a form of life of a society different from his or her own is always done against the backcloth of 'our world', not its world.

Yet that just raises the epistemological ante. What is the backcloth of 'our world'? Is it unitary and homogeneous; or does it contain diverse, multiple or even incompatible elements, such as the various extant philosophical traditions within our own world, each of which has tried, in very different ways, to make sense of the *apparent* ontological co-existence in our world of physical and unphysical things? And which parts of that backcloth should we rely on when we produce a representation of a form of life different from our own (for example, spiritual and ghost beliefs are pretty common in our world)? Does that representation, relying (as it must) on some part of the intellectual and cultural backcloth of 'our world', actually manage to achieve epistemic objectivity? Or must it inevitably rely on some discretionary (and hence local) point of view?

I am going to hazard a definition here. Consider any statement or representation which claims to depict what an event, process, state or object (whether a physical object or an unphysical object) is really like. That statement or representation is *subjective* in the epistemic sense if its full meaning and its validity can only be ascertained by relying on some discretionary (and hence local) point of view. Here are some representations of what reality is really like: (a) that's a great sin, (b) he is a witch, (c) he just scored a touchdown, (d) I caused my hand to rise by intending it to do so, and (e) the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force. According to the definition each of those statements (or representations) should be classified as subjective (in the epistemic sense) if its meaning and validity cannot be ascertained independent of adopting ways of understanding and methods of investigation that are discretionary and specific to members of particular interpretive communities. It seems to me that each of those statements is marked by epistemic subjectivity in that sense.

John Searle will not agree. According to at least one type of reading of his essay he believes that epistemic objectivity is achievable for the full set of statements (a–e); and ontological objectivity (by which he means being an observer-independent material thing) is absent for the things described in statements a–c. As I reflect upon the philosophical assumptions of my version of romantic pluralism I am led to suggest that none of the statements is objective in the epistemic sense. Consider, for example, the statement 'e' – the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force. Physicists study physical things and know a good deal about physical particles in fields of force, but they are not experts when it comes to the study of intentional states or social facts; and (as far as I know) their science qua science has no objective methods for answering metaphysical questions about the types of things that are real. Why should I as a cultural anthropologist trying to understand the reality, validity and intelligibility of forms of life different from my own privilege knowledge in the physical sciences over knowledge in the unphysical (interpretive and formal) sciences? One need not doubt any of the findings of the physical sciences (although many are likely to be overturned) to suggest that there are no non-contingent universal reasons absolutely mandating that one must view the world through the eyes of a philosophical materialist. Hence statement 'e' is not objective from an epistemic point of view; it is, as noted earlier, an article of philosophical faith.

I realize that my response to John Searle's essay leaves many crucial questions unanswered (and even unaddressed). I believe it is possible for our 'prejudices' to make it possible for us to see; that is to say, it is possible for a statement or representation that

is subjective in the epistemic sense (and hence is based on a discretionary assumption or particular method or point of view) to actually manage to validly represent something that is ontologically real (in a world 2 or world 3 sense or in the sense of combining all three worlds). I believe this is especially true when it comes to representing the meaning-laden acts and material artifacts that give substance and character to any particular form of life. Yet I have not explained precisely how is it possible for us to step inside a form of life that is different from our own yet be able to grasp it while relying on concepts and premises that we appropriate from a backcloth that is available to us in our own world. Could it be that such forms of life are intelligible and their validity can be assessed because there is a base set of observer-independent ideas or concepts that all normal humans can grasp? What is in that base set? How many intellectual objects does it contain? How abstract or concrete is their form? Giving plausible answers to those questions is what 'interpretive studies' and a philosophy of romantic pluralism ought to be partly about. Call that 'Platonism' if you like but do not fail to recognize the intellectual puzzles one is trying to solve in positing a three-world philosophy of the real.

I am grateful to John Searle for this opportunity to think through his essay. I hope he will forgive me if I have missed or misinterpreted any of his points. In conclusion, my most general reaction to his theory of social ontology is that his one-world imagined resolution to the mind/body problem (philosophical materialism) limits the types of statements one can make about the objective world (in the ontological sense) to statements about physical particles in fields of force. His emphasis or focus on the constitutive or symbolic powers of language, and his way of coping with the division between objective and subjective points of view (his claim that objectivity in the epistemic sense and objectivity in the ontological sense are detachable), leads him to treat social facts as purely conventional and subjective. Consequently, when it comes to social facts (including institutional facts) 'communal consensus makes it so' and questions about the truth or goodness or validity of social facts are underplayed and perhaps cannot even arise.

My own view is that pluralistic anthropology (and perhaps other 'unphysical sciences' such as moral psychology and mathematics) is better served by a philosophy of the real that does not start with the assumption that the world is made up entirely of physical particles in fields of force. It is the adoption of that optional materialist assumption, and not the absence of epistemic objectivity, that would make cultural anthropology impossible. The reason for opting instead for a three-world (Sir Karl Popper-like) philosophy of the real is not that one can then go about doing one's scholarly work without feeling utterly baffled by the existence of consciousness, the experience of mental causation, the idea of transcendent moral obligations, and the observer-independent existence of (rather 'unphysical') mathematical objects and truths. For a practicing cultural anthropologist the main reason has something to do with finding a philosophy of the real that helps us make sense of our ability as anthropologists to give an intelligible account (or meaningful translation) of real forms of life different from our own without interpreting indigenous apprehensions of the really real (the sacred, the divine, the moral) as either reified illusions or fetishized figments of a collective imagination. If this requires an affirmation of the spiritual nature of human beings and the reality of a 'Platonic Heaven' so be it.

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