

A Cocktail of Searle

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In this auditorium, or ‘Aula Magna’, in front of me, there is a man whose weight is 73 kilos, that is 113 pounds (according to the postmoderns there are two distinct men) and, at the same time, someone who has been awarded with the ‘Mind and Brain’ (‘Mente e Cervello’) Prize, and a great contemporary philosopher. This possibility does not depend upon the fact that this room, as its Latin name says, is wide. Searle has taught us that when he is alone in an hotel room, not just one physical person, but many social objects are also there: a professor, an husband, a driving license holder, an employee of the state of California... Therefore, only the 25%, namely one of the four social objects Searle is speaking about, is awarded with the ‘Mind and Brain’ Prize: the professor. Notice, however, that the prize—since it is named ‘Mind and Brain’—does not seem to refer to the whole of Searle’s activity. Here we are awarding the philosopher of mind, the master of the Chinese Room, so to speak, but this—however important is—is but the 25% of the philosophical activity of Searle. We are letting out, at least, the philosopher of language, the discoverer of social ontology, and the anti-postmodern polemist. To sum up, we are awarding the 25% of the 25%. The 25% of the 25% is peanuts, it is just a little bit more than the 6%. And this is still enough to win such an important prize; even more so important a prize once we ponder the fact that other philosophers would not deserve it by considering the 100% of their activity—the driving license holder included.

What I would like to do—in the following 9 minutes I still have after this accountant-like preamble—is mainly this: I will explain how this 25% (we are considering the philosophical sphere only) is at the end of the day one and the same with the remaining 75%—the Searle philosopher of language, the social ontologist and the postmoderns flogger. I am not going to do that in order to diminish him, it is not my intention and it would not be nice at an awarding ceremony; I am doing it for two reasons. Firstly, because I think that this is what you all aspect from me, who I am not a philosopher of mind. Secondly, in order to show that in this Professor from Denver—who has been studying in Wisconsin and then at Oxford for almost ten years, has taught in California nearly forty years, and holds conferences all over the world—we can unexpectedly find much of the soul of a German systematic philosopher. One of those philosophers whom he obstinately ignores, and despises, if he ever knows them. However, if the image of the system appears too hefty, I would

propose that of a cocktail of Searle—a cocktail to be prepared with the mixer and the shaker obviously, and by well balancing the four ingredients. Please allow me to run through them briefly.

The first quarter is set at Oxford, during the fifties, at the school of—among the others—John Austin, and continues at Berkeley during the sixties and seventies. Here Searle's activity focused on linguistic acts, a specially subtle part of language. When I say "yes" at a wedding ceremony, I am not describing anything that is already there, I am constructing something that is born in that very instant. The rhapsodic analyses of Austin get a systematic dimension in Searle's work. Searle offers a complete classification of them, but this is not the only thing he is doing. On the one hand (and the upshots in social ontology derive from here), Searle does not limit himself to a classification of linguistic acts, but he acknowledges also the existence of objects that may be borne to life by performative acts—a particular kind of linguistic acts. A marriage and a conviction, for instance, understood as rites, may last just few minutes in their culminating moment. The corresponding social objects may last years though, and it is the philosopher's task to account for those objects' existence. By doing this, however, a philosopher should deliver a theory of mind too, since the peculiar feature of objects such as marriages or penal convictions, differently than cows or mountains, is existing only if there are minds believing that they exist. As Searle has recently reminded, in the second half of the past century, philosophy of mind has succeed philosophy of language as 'first philosophy' because most of the philosophers have acknowledged that philosophy of language is but a part of philosophy of mind.

And here we are at the second quart of Searle, set in Berkeley, during the Eighties. It is the Searle who more closely relate to the 'Mind and Brain' Prize. Austin was exclusively concerned with language (and perception), Searle, I have just suggested, was seeking for a theory of mind. Could a computer passing the Turing test get married? Is a computer used in a betting shop really betting? Can it christen a boat? Can it bequest something to another computer? The obvious answer to all these questions is 'no'. And this depends on the fact that human mind has something that computers do not have: intentionality. Intentionality is the capacity to refer to things in the world, by using the representations we have at our disposal here under the hair, beyond the eyes, and between the ears roughly—namely in our minds. Intentionality, however, is not a ghost, a feeble mist descending on the world as postmoderns uphold—when they claim that Being is reducible to Language. Not at all, it is something as real as photosynthesis or digestion is. We should not misunderstand this point, because one thing is maintaining that human mind is not a computer, and quite another maintaining that Darwin was wrong. This is a very delicate knot, because claiming

that someone in a room communicating by ideograms that s/he deciphers with the aid of a glossary does not thereby know Chinese (and therefore a computer manipulating symbols without understanding them does not think) does not amount to upholding that there exist something like the holy ghost descending over the things in the world (which is a belief that is not less implausible than Santa's existence). Moreover, from a social ontological standpoint, maintaining that the *individual I* is in many cases the result of a collective intentionality does not mean that reality is constituted in an inter-subjective way. Not at all, there are pieces of reality perfectly capable of staying by themselves, and they do not depend on language or conscience. Other pieces, surely, do depend on them. Still, we should not mix them up, if we do not want honest philosophy coming to an end.

Here we come to the third quarter of Searle. It is set here and there around the world between the seventies and the eighties. Searle assists—not inert but astonished—to postmoderns spreading through the departments of comparative literature, under the risk that sooner or later they would get to philosophy departments too. Here is the crowd: who says that the Being that can be understood is language, and who says that nothing exists outside of texts, and you would eventually meet a fun-loving person maintaining that there are no facts, but only interpretations. In conclusion, the moral seem to be that—quite paradoxically—words, but not things, exist; concepts exist, but not the objects they refer to. Postmoderns seem to turn the linguistic turn into an ultra-Berkeleyan (after the philosopher, not Searle's University) turn, reminding us of the lady who—in an anecdote by Russell—claims that solipsism is a wonderful theory, and wonders why a solipsistic association was yet to be founded. We would be mistaken in seeing in this ingredient of the cocktail simply a polemical phase, since it is this framework that Searle elaborates the theory of the reality as 'background'. Reality is something that does not require to be demonstrated, because it is at the ground of our demonstrations. Reality constitutes the basic element of Searle's general ontology, and it delivers us the deep sense of his realism—and, at the same time, the deep sense of the non-realism of the postmodern speaker who, with his laptop, on the plane, polishes the talk s/he will give at a conference in an American University, on the topic of the non-existence of the external world.

And here the last quarter of our cocktail comes, which is set in Paris, during the nineties. Searle enters in a Café, and pronounces a French sentence "*Un demi, Munich, à pression, s'il vous plaît*". Searle makes us notice that this very simple sentence triggers a huge invisible ontology: the

social exchange between he and the waiters, a lattice of norms, prices, fares, rules, passports and nationalities, a universe of such a complexity that it would have had Kant shivering, if only Kant had thought about it. We are the postmoderns' antipodes. If postmoderns dissolve tables and seats by reducing them to interpretations, Searle's ontology asserts that also things such as promises and bets, shares and debts, medieval knights and Californian Professors, tenures and symphonies possess a peculiar reality. They are neither ghosts, nor movements of the consciousness or of the will (given that promises exist when we sleep, and in case we change our mind too), they are higher order objects with respect to physical objects, in accordance with the rule 'X counts as Y in C'—meaning that the physical object X, for instance a colored piece of paper, count as Y, a 10 euro banknote, in C, the Europe of the year 2006.

At the beginning we were talking of "system", and it is not hard to see how here we are approaching the system's closure. The philosopher of language who has studied linguistic acts, comes across performative and notices that with them we can construct social objects; the philosopher of mind, who has studied intentionality, understands intentionality's role in the construction of social reality; the anti-postmodern polemist, in turn, elaborates a realist ontology that enable us to understand that—for some reasons and our intentions and hopes notwithstanding—it is useless to try avoiding to pay the beer by saying that reality (social and maybe physical reality as well) is socially constructed. The last move was left for the social ontologist: discovering this new reign of objects that—please notice—cannot be defined as 'mental' just because they need human minds.

The cocktail is served, and thereby I have done what I was supposed to, or nearly so. My admiration for Searle, the richness of his ideas, the rigor and strength of his style, cannot make me forget that in this very auditorium, in 1998, I have read another speech, in honor of a philosopher with whom during the seventies Searle had fiercely argued. I am talking about Jacques Derrida. I have always regretted that clash, facing so different, almost antithetic, two philosophers and styles. Also because I have always had the impression that often the dissent was essentially on matters of taste and style. As a conclusion, I would like to try to appease the quarrel, posthumously, and taking care not to spoil our celebration. I will focus on that very Café in Paris where Searle sets the beginning of his book in social ontology.

At Oxford, in the fifties, Searle learned that you can do things with words. Few decades later, postmoderns had the sphere of performative acts so enlarged that among the things you can do

with words you would find the moon as well. And really this cannot be tolerated. Arrived *in partibus infidelium*, namely in the postmodern Paris, Searle must have banged his fist on the table: *Garçon, un demi, Munich, à pression, s'il vous plaît!* By banging the fist he would highlight that—by so doing—he had produced neither the beer, nor the table. Rather, he has given an order to a waiter who existed by himself, and only a contract between him and the *garçon* has been produced here. The latter—were not he offended by being addressed as in a Jean Gabin's movie—was compelled to get him the beer, as much as Searle was compelled to pay. The act, then, would produce an object (the contract, not the beer) that in turn is made possible by other invisible objects—norms, prices, rules, etc. Here is how you can stop the postmodern *déravage*: by affirming the law 'X counts as Y in C': social objects too need matter (molecules of beers, papers, costumers and waiters), and maintaining this is rather different than maintaining that matter is socially constructed.

Very well. Now, we know that this theory (and Searle knows it very well too) has counterexamples, since it is not clear what physical object corresponds to a negative entity such as, for instance, a debt. There *is* also in this case, to speak the truth, a physical object, although is rather a peculiar one: it is something written on a paper or a computer, or simply in the mind of someone. If this is the case, then I wonder whether Searle's formula could not be generalized by the formula 'Object = Inscribed Act'. I mean that we do not need huge physical objects (a territory, a human body, a piece of paper or a coin) to obtain a social object: in many cases few ink molecules, or some neurons, are enough. If we granted this (and Searle agreed), we would acknowledge that social objects depend on social acts concerning at least two persons—two persons that should be able to remember what they do—and an inscription is the only physical thing it takes. The inscription, *viz.* the trace, is a concept on which Derrida insisted a lot: without inscriptions of some kind, in the head at least, there would not be society, although, obviously, there may be inscriptions (for instance the notches on Robinson's calendar) without there being a society. If Searle agreed on this proposal, and on the other hand we weakened Derrida's assertion (as such unsustainable) "nothing exists outside texts" this award ceremony would maybe achieved a supplementary results: that of appeasing, although retrospectively, a long run quarrel.

This soothed and soothing image may be surprising. Searle is the only philosopher who has been compared (and by his estimators) to John Wayne and Robespierre. Still—his pricking tone notwithstanding, and exactly because he is so remarkably clear in stating the alternatives—one of the reason of the grandness of Searle has always been the capacity of throwing bridges: between nature and society, between mind and language, between science and philosophy. Thanks to a great

philosopher such as Searle, then, for once it is true a motto on which we may often have good reason to doubt: *si vis pacem, para bellum*.