John Dewey’s Democratic Intentionality

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John Dewey’s analyses of the relationships among ethical theory, intellectual-growth, and the nature of democratic societies are of continuing interest to social and political philosophers, especially those who hold an evolutionary view of these inquiries. The ontological analysis of society and social facts, recently advanced by John Searle, provides us with an alternative way to approach Dewey’s thought that is at variance with traditional Deweyan scholarship. While Dewey’s arguments are not changed, through Searle’s social ontology we can see them differently, which further reveals the complex nature of democratic intentionality.

1. Introduction

A significant area of investigation within contemporary philosophy is centered on John Searle’s ontological theory of society, which may be thought of as a structural template that identifies the basic constitutive components of every society, and in terms of which the existence of any society is explained. The theory is useful in many ways, not the least of which is the explanation of how institutions come into being, and how a deontology is infused within them. Searle’s ontological account is committed to no particular political philosophy, and none of the objections to it that I have seen have been raised in terms of substantive political philosophy.

While the theory, as a general theory, is not intended to distinguish among various kinds of societies, such as monarchies, oligarchies, or democracies, it appears that Searle’s ontological account could contribute to our understanding of the differences between democracy and alternative societal forms. In particular, it should be instructive to impose Searle’s template upon John Dewey’s conclusions about the characteristics of democratic societies. It turns out that Searle’s social ontology is identifiable in Dewey’s analyses; moreover, Searle’s theory serves to highlight many of Dewey’s conclusions, and makes them more accessible and interesting to those who follow Searle’s thought.

The use of Searle’s explanation in connection with Dewey’s ideas is far from a revisionist reworking of Dewey’s analyses of ethics and democracy.
What is suggested below as to how to understand Dewey is based on social experience that will stand even if Searle’s views are rejected in toto; that is, the basic social facts used can readily be seen as existing independently of, and prior to, Searle’s account. Nevertheless, Searle’s analysis is important in its own right, as well as a way to come at Dewey’s thought afresh. While the two accounts of society and social institutions are far from congruent, there are questions and arguments that Searle’s theory has pulled into prominence that are helpful in looking more deeply into Dewey’s views. More importantly, there are elements in Dewey’s thought that can be seen as elaborations and alternatives to certain features of Searle’s theory. This reveals that there are aspects of Dewey’s discussions of democracy that are under-appreciated, and thus, understudied.

2. Brief Overview of Searle’s Social Ontology

According to Searle’s ontological account of society, collective intentionality is the fundamental concept from which flows the sea of social institutions in which we live and function. Intentionality is a person’s general state of mind, which includes desires, intentions, beliefs, attitudes, and so forth. Institutions are social creations that provide us with the collective means to do things that individuals or groups could not accomplish in isolation. To explain how institutions exist, Searle presents three concepts: (i) status functions; (ii) deontic powers; and (iii) desire-independent reasons for action. Currency, marriage, police, college football, and prime ministers are institutions that are created by means of status-function declarations. A status function assigns X the status of Y in context C. A dollar bill, for example, has value because there is a status function that assigns it that value. Moreover, as James Mackintosh asks, in the Financial Times, “Why is gold regarded as a safe store of value? Because, just like paper currencies, people believe it is.”

Status functions always carry with them, “without exception,” deontic powers. That is, they carry rights, duties, requirements, permissions, authorizations, entitlements, and so on. For example, the status of professor is created by a status function that has worldwide recognition; that status is seen as having certain negative rights, such as freedom of inquiry, and certain duties and obligations such as the obligation of professors to make themselves vulnerable to national and international criticisms of the content of their teaching.

According to Searle, “the test for whether a noun names an institution is whether under that description the object named has deontic powers.” When we make a promise, for example, we feel an obligation to keep it, that is, to fulfill the conditions of the promise. Young children show their grasp of this deontic force when they ask, “You promise?” The deontic powers that inhere within institutional statuses are either positive deontic powers or rights, or negative deontic powers or obligations. Positive deontic powers create negative rights, and negative deontic powers create duties and obligations. A negative right is a right against interference, and a positive right is a right to certain benefits, such