

On DIRFAs

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You are traveling in a strange and foreign country, where you don't speak the language, when you run into a friendly old man who gestures for you to follow him back to his hut. There he offers you the choice of one of two different kinds of soup that a woman in the kitchen (his wife, you presume) has made. You choose one and he pours you a bowl. It is delicious and you eat the whole thing before bowing deeply and heading for the door. But he blocks you and stares you down. You're puzzled; what does he want? He removes a coin from his pocket and begins fingering it. He gestures to your own pocket.

You look around and realize you were quite mistaken. This was not a friendly old man inviting you back to his house for supper — this is a barker attracting customers to his restaurant! And now, of course, he wants you to pay.

Now you may pay — perhaps because you feel bad for the old man and woman and don't want them to be out money on your account, or perhaps because you've just noticed the menacing broad-shouldered fellow in the corner with a club — but either way, you pay out of some personal desire: a desire to help the couple, or avoid the club.

Upon return to the States, you relax from your stressful journey by heading to your favorite restaurant. The waiter brings you a menu listing the various options (it is a classy place, so no prices are marked) and you say that you would prefer one. The waiter eventually returns with it, you eat it, and it's delicious.

Now the situation, despite seeming very similar, is somehow entirely different. You feel an obligation to stay and pay the bill. Not simply because you don't want to get arrested, or because you want to be able to return to the restaurant later. You have a reason to pay the bill independent of any of your own desires. You must pay the bill because, by sitting down and ordering, you promised you would.

One cannot accidentally promise, which is why the promise didn't exist in the foreign country, but you knew full well that ordering at the restaurant in the States was a promise to pay full price at the end of the meal. And by promising, you have created a desire-independent reason for action, or, as I put it, a DIRFA.

DIRFAs are surely the most amazing and confounding of all of Searle's discoveries. It seems crazy to think that there can be some magical realm, independent of any individual human desire, to which we can be called to account. And yet, there it is. We pay at the restaurant not because we want to, or because we want to help certain others, but because we have committed to doing so and that commitment somehow binds us.

In his new book, *Making the Social World*, Searle shows that, contrary to appearances, DIRFAs (like all social institutions) are merely an outgrowth of language. This is an incredible claim, but Searle makes a convincing case.

Imagine saying, “Barack Obama is president of the United States.” A simple, unexceptional act. But simply by doing it, you have entered into a whole series of social commitments. You have committed that you believe it. If you said it and did not believe it, people could rightly criticize you for lying. And your belief commits you to its truth; if it turned out to be false, people could criticize you for being wrong. You also commit yourself to communicating this belief; if you mumbled and your audience misheard you, you could be criticized for being unclear. If you were speaking to someone who had a friend named Barack Obama and did not know of the other man with the same name who is currently the US President, you could be criticized for being confusing.

A simple statement — the physical act consisting of a few vocal cord vibrations and associated lip movements — has pulled you into a whole web of social attachments and commitments. To communicate presupposes a whole system of social ontology.

It is difficult to overstate the implications. Much of political thought is about why people participate in institutions that do not benefit them. Why don’t the workers rise up and overthrow capitalism if all they have to lose are their chains? Is it because hegemony has persuaded them that the existing order is just and natural? Searle lays the foundations for a much simpler solution.

Kaczynski argued that the left was the result of oversocialization. Leftists took the social constraints they were taught — don’t discriminate on the basis of race, for example — so strongly that they begin applying them much more widely than the others around them. But Searle shows how this is a necessary outgrowth of empathy, the left’s defining traits: social institutions are grounded in a form of collective intentionality, where others count upon you to obey the institutional rules. Someone who can better imagine others’ minds must feel this network of expectations on them to be especially strong.

This book feels like Searle’s last book. It weaves together the entire scope of his career — from speech acts, to consciousness, to politics — in a single, stunning answer to this most vexing question: how can we mere sacks of meat, through brute physical acts, create constructions (like promises, or money, or corporations) that can then turn around and bind us. How glorious to see an entire lifetime of work coming together to answer this question at last.

- [Buy the book](#)