Language and Society: Reply to McGinn

By John R. Searle

In his review of my book, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (Oxford University Press, 2010) in NYRB Nov 11, 2010. Colin McGinn makes a number of criticisms. I believe that without exception these criticisms are mistaken; and most, though not all, rest on misunderstandings of my position. I do not normally respond to reviews of my work, but I make an exception in this case because *The New York Review* is so important both to me personally and to intellectual life in the English speaking world. *The Review* does not have space for the entire reply so I am augmenting the published short reply with this longer one.

I. Language, Thought, Concepts and Institutions.

The basic disagreement between McGinn and me concerns the relations between language, thought, concepts and institutional reality. I will first state my position, then what he thinks my position is (a misunderstanding on his part) and then his position. My position is that all of institutional reality, the human social reality that is distinctively human, is created by linguistic representations that have a certain specific logical form, that of what I call “Status Function Declarations”. Status functions are functions such as being money or being president that can only be performed in virtue of the collective recognition of the person or entity in question as having a certain status. Declarations are unusual linguistic phenomena, because unlike other speech acts they have both directions-of-fit simultaneously, both word-to-world and world to word. We make someone or something chairman of the meeting, president of the United States, money or private property by representing it as such, but the form of the representation is to create the very reality it represents. This need not always be in the form of an explicit speech act. It can be done implicitly just by treating the object in a certain way, or in a limiting case where
there is a community of thought, just by collectively thinking about something in a certain way. But even in such cases, the thoughts must be communicable. It is important to see that the representations must involve symbolism or some sort and must have the logical form of Status Function Declarations. To create the reality represented they must have the double direction-of-fit. In creating status functions we create sets of “deontic powers” such as rights, duties and obligations; and these are the glue that holds human civilization together because they provide desire independent reasons for action. So, to summarize, the equations go as follows: All institutional facts are status functions. Status functions without exception are created by (representations with the form of) Status Function Declarations. Status Functions create deontic powers. Deontic powers provide desire independent reasons for action. And desire independent reasons for action are the distinctive binding force of human civilization.

McGinn’s misrepresentation of my view is that all institutional reality has to be created by explicitly uttering words. He thinks that I think you cannot have a marriage unless somebody says out loud that it is a marriage. When he discovers that that is not my view he does not think he made a mistake in interpretation, which he in fact did, but rather that somehow I am “sliding and hedging”. I think this shows that he did not understand the concept of a Status Function Declaration or what a speech act is. I will come back to this point later. His own view is something like the following: there is a completely contingent connection between words and concepts. Since what matters in the creation of institutional reality are the concepts, there is no requirement for words at all. We could create, though less “conveniently,” all of institutional reality, such as money, property, marriage, the United States government, etc. with no words or symbols whatever. He thinks that words and concepts are two distinct kinds of entities, and just as you can have words without concepts, so you can have concepts without words. This, then, is
the substantive disagreement between us. It is not about institutional reality as such, but about
the relation of language to concepts. We both agree that institutional facts are created by
representations, the issue is whether the representations require words (I will sometimes use
“words” as short for “words, symbols, marks and other symbolic devices” and “language” as
short for “language and or other systems of symbolic representation”) There are two things
wrong with his view: 1) you cannot have concepts of the kind we are talking about without
language or some form of symbolism and 2) in order to create institutional reality the concepts
have to be communicable from one person to another, and such communication requires some
public means of communication, specifically words, symbols and other such devices.

McGinn persistently assumes a possible complete separation between language and
thought. There is no such separation. In the areas under consideration where we are thinking
about systems of government, private property, money exchange, etc., thinking consists in
operating with words. You cannot have the thought without some vehicle in which the thought is
expressed.

It is important to call attention to how unusual McGinn’s position is. Of all of the
criticisms of my view since I first began publishing on this topic in the mid-nineties, he is the
only person who has said language is not essential for the creation of human institutional reality.
What is the argument for the connection between language and concepts? The notion of a
concept is problematic in a way that I do not think he understands. In any case, we can say this
much: maybe not all concepts require words. But all thinking with concepts requires some
medium. Maybe for some simple concepts images will do but they will not do for the sort of
concepts we are discussing here. (By the way, not all thinking requires concepts. For example,
when I am skiing fast down a mountain or driving to work I am engaged in thought processes
about my next move, but they need not involve any concepts. Intuitively I think it is fairly obvious that the kind of thought processes we are considering in the creation and maintenance of institutional reality requires some means of public expression. You can try it out with a couple of thought experiments. If an anthropologist tells us that he has discovered a tribe that has language but no institutions, such as private property, government or money, we find this acceptable. Indeed, something rather like that has been discovered by Dan Everett with the Piraha in the Amazon basin. But if an anthropologist tells us that he has discovered a tribe that has the complete gamut of institutions - they have marriage, divorce, government with a separation of powers, money and banking complete with loans and interest rates - but they have no language whatever, we know that this is incoherent. All of those phenomena require linguistic means of representation for their very existence.

Well, why cannot people just think the concepts without any words? The answer, to repeat and to emphasize, is that they first have to be able to communicate these concepts, but secondly, concepts never come pure. They always come in some mode of realization, such as words, imagery, symbols, etc. Again, here is another thought-experiment that will illustrate this point: think any complex thought involving institutions in words then think the same thought without words. Here is a thought I had this morning at breakfast:

“The problem with current discussions of deficit reduction is that the authors typically fail to distinguish between the deficit and the national debt. Short term deficits are only dangerous to the American economy if they produce an intolerable increase in the national debt.”

Now, McGinn thinks I can think exactly that same thought with or without words. I do not think you can. First, think it in words. Now, think it without words; just think the pure
concepts, I do not have any idea what I would do except think the same words but in an abbreviated form. All the same, you need some sort of symbolism. (Wittgenstein reminded us of all this more than half a century ago. Have his lessons been forgotten?)

Several important features of the relations of thoughts and concepts are relevant to this discussion. I want to simply list them.

1. *Content.* In coherent thought every concept is part of a total intentional content. So if I am thinking about mathematics or politics, the concepts that go through my mind have to be parts of total propositional contents. Each concept makes a contribution to the total content. One mark of the concept is that people in possession of the concept are able to understand thoughts containing that concept.

2. *Composition.* Related to point 1 is that concepts combine with other concepts to form propositions in a way that enables us to figure out the whole proposition by understanding the various concepts that compose it and the relations between them. If I think the proposition that water is wet, the proposition contains two concepts: 1) the concept of water and 2) the concept of wetness. The proposition joins them in a specific way.

3. *Holism.* In general, you can only have a concept if you have a lot of other related concepts. This is especially true of institutional concepts. You cannot have the concept of money without having the concepts of exchange, value, property, buying, selling, owing and paying. Institutional concepts never come in isolated atomistic forms.

4. *Generality.* Concepts are general in that a concept in principle at least can apply to more than one thing. Sometimes there will be a concept that applies in fact to only one thing, such as the
concept “winner of the race”. But that is because the concepts that go to make up “winner of the race” are general concepts which are combined in such a way as to allow only one instance.

6. **Normativity.** A concept sets normative standards for its correct application. You are applying or misapplying a concept depending on whether or not you meet the normative standards for that particular concept.

7. **Stimulus Independence.** To be in possession of a concept you have to be able to operate with that concept in a way that is independent of being immediately stimulated by its instances. An animal that just responds to red does not yet thereby have the concept of red. To have the concept it has to be able to think with that concept in a way that is independent of immediate stimuli.

   This is especially important for the present discussion because though one might have the concept of red without any language, you cannot have the concept of obligation or democracy or private property without some verbal form. Why? The short answer is that the concept is too remote from the sensory features of immediate instances of the concept. You cannot acquire the concept of obligation or democracy just by sensory stimulation in a way that you might be able to acquire the concept of red. One has to have some symbolic representation of the content of the concept in order to operate with it.

8. **Concepts require a medium in which they are realized.** This is the most crucial point for the present discussion. The thesis I am arguing for is that for many, probably most, concepts you cannot operate with without some word or other symbolic device that expresses the concept. We do not have the appropriate semantic vocabulary to state this point, so I will simply say things like “express the concept”. What I am getting at is that the concept cannot, so to speak, operate
as a pure mental content on its own. It requires some expression, some medium in which it occurs.

9. Status Function Declaration. There are special features of the concepts that can occur in status function which make language essential. Not only do the concepts have to be expressed in sentences but the sentences have to be usable in a very special kind of speech act, the Status Function Declaration. Here is the “miracle” of Status Function Declarations and of human institutional reality. If we all get together and agree that it is raining, that fact by itself will not make it rain. But if we all get together and agree in a certain way that such and such is money then the stuff in question is money. How does it work? How is the miracle possible? That is not a trivial question, and I give a rather lengthy answer in chapters 4 and 5 of the book, where I explain in detail what is special about human languages that enable them to both represent and create. As far as we know, other animal languages, such as the famous bee language can represent how things are and can incite their conspecifics to appropriate actions, but I do not know of any other species that has the capacity to create a reality by representing the reality as already existing. I show how it is possible for human beings to do this because of the special commitment features of human languages and their relations to the deontic concepts. I do not think McGinn is aware of the problem or of the complexity of the solution.

This is the central point at issue between me and McGinn. Humans create a reality by a certain type of linguistic representation. But this poses my problem: How can such a thing be possible at all? McGinn writes, “[T]here seems little difficulty in the idea that the collective recognition of status functions by itself is sufficient to create institutional facts…” Quite so. I could have written that sentence myself. But McGinn does not see that this is the problem and not the solution. The problem is to explain how it works. I answer that question by giving a
detailed account of how certain features of human language make it possible. McGinn does not seem aware of either the problem or the solution that I propose.

II. Some Mistakes in Interpretation

All of the rest of his criticisms rest on misunderstandings. I will simply list and correct them.

1. He praises my earlier book, *The Construction of Social Reality* because he believes I didn’t think that language was essential and criticizes this book because I say it is. He did not understand either. Language is equally essential on both accounts. The difference is that, in the second book, I am able to say exactly what the logical form of the linguistic representation is: a Status Function Declaration.

2. He mistakes the nature of my enterprise. He thinks I am doing old-fashioned conceptual analysis where you try to give logically necessary and sufficient conditions that apply to anything, anywhere. He says I claim it’s “logically impossible” (his italics) for there to be any beings that have institutional reality without having language.” I make no such claim. Perhaps there is a race of supernatural beings, gods, who think in pure concepts without benefit of language and who communicate by mental telepathy. I have no interest in such possibilities. The subtitle of my book is “The Structure of Human Civilization.”

3. He is unclear about what is a linguistic act or a speech act. He doubts that just pushing the glass of beer towards someone can be a speech act. In the case that I describe, it is obviously a speech act, a Status Function Declaration. “Speech act” is a quasi-technical term that means roughly, “a meaningful linguistic act that is intended to communicate propositional content with an illocutionary force from speaker to hearer, which may be spoken, written, or conveyed in some other symbolic form.” But that’s a bit long-winded and “speech act” is the accepted shorthand. He thinks I am somehow weakening or modifying (‘sliding and hedging’) my
account when I allow for speech acts to be performed by something other than spoken words. But that is not a weakening. It is an emphatic exemplification. You do not understand the first thing about speech act theory if you think that all speech acts have to be spoken explicitly.  
4. He takes me to task because, in a book subtitled “The Structure of Human Civilization,” I do not talk about all the other aspects of civilization, such as architecture, science and technology. But the subtitle makes it clear that I am discussing the structure, not the content. My point is that all of these activities distinctive of human civilization require deontic structures. Before the creation of the Academy in Athens (his example), there still had to be informal undertakings and those were institutional facts of precisely the sort I am describing.

5. In a breath taking misreading, McGinn assumes that I am advancing the view that any status function can be assigned to any object whatever. For example, that stones can be married. I discuss the constraints on the assignment of status functions in some detail. A main consequence of the typical status function creating formula, “X counts as Y in context C” is that only because something satisfies the conditions set by the X term can it be counted as having the Y status functions. For example only because I meet certain conditions (X terms) can I be a licensed driver, a US citizen, a husband, a university professor or a good friend. (Y terms). He thinks I am committed to the view that anything can be counted as anything.

6. In another amazing passage he takes me to task for not making explicit how human social reality differs from that of other social animals. But that is one of the main points of the book. Animals have societies with pair bonding, possessions and power relations, but they do not have money, property, marriage and government. Why not? And what do we get from the human forms that the animal forms do not have? Institutional facts create powers of a very specific kind that I call “deontic powers” - obligations, rights, duties, authorizations, permissions, etc. And
why is that importantly different from animals? Deontic powers, once created and recognized, create reasons for action that are independent of desires and inclinations. If I have an obligation to do something then I have a reason for doing it even if I do not otherwise feel like it. My dog Gilbert is a wonderful and intelligent animal but he cannot create, recognize, reason about, or act on his obligations. Why not? Is he too irresponsible? To act on obligations you have to have the concept of an obligation, and to have that concept you have to have language.