Critique of Telic Power

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Abstract: Åsa Burman has recently introduced the important notion of telic power and differentiated it from deontic power in an attempt to build a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology. We find Burman's project promising but we argue that more is to be done to make it entirely successful. First, there is a palpable tension between Burman's claim that telic power can be ontologically independent of deontic power and her examples, which suggests that these forms of power share the same basis. Second, it is not completely clear how telic power specifically helps non-ideal social ontologists explain oppression. We offer solutions to both problems. First, we argue that Burman's arguments for the conclusion that telic power can exist without deontic power are unsuccessful. Burman contends that this is possible because some social roles involving telic power can exist independently of institutions as sets of constitutive rules, which are—in her opinion—the source of deontic power. Burman's arguments are not successful because she disregards the plausible view that all social roles involve deontic power, whether or not they are institutional. Second, we argue that while the exercise of deontic power requires a collective recognition of the social roles of the interacting agents and, therefore, a recognition of the associated norms, the exercise of telic power does not require recognition of the relevant norms. This is why invoking telic power is particularly useful in explaining how oppression and injustice can arise. Lastly, we suggest that Burman has not fully clarified the relation between teleological normativity and the forms of telic power and requires a deeper analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, mainstream social ontology has been criticised by a growing number of philosophers. What Francesco Guala (2007) calls the "standard model of social ontology" (SMOSO)—exemplified by the works of Margaret Gilbert, John Searle, and Raimo Tuomela, among others—tends to ground social theorising in the analysis of depoliticised phenomena such as, for example, taking a walk together, organising a picnic, or institutions such as money or being a professor.[1] Åsa Burman (2023) calls "ideal social ontology" the type of social ontology that gravitates around the SMOSO. This type of social ontology tends to focus on small-scale, egalitarian, cooperative groups or codified institutional roles and abstracts away from the messiness that often characterises social reality. In this way, it typically ignores more conflictual and divisive phenomena, such as those concerning gender, race, or economic classes. This approach results in a partial, if not deceptive, picture of the social world as a predominantly consensual and harmonious domain.

The recent critique of ideal social ontology has been accompanied by novel work in the field that has focused on more conflictual or divisive social phenomena—exemplified by influential papers by Sally Haslanger, Ásta and Katharine Jenkins, among others. Burman calls this new stream "non-ideal social ontology." A central aim of it is to contribute to understanding and, in some cases, to resisting various types of social oppression and injustices such as racism and sexism.

Although we are supportive of the approach of non-ideal social ontology, we share Burman's concern that if we simply switch from the traditional idealised version of social reality to these new frameworks, we will once again end up with a partisan picture: one describing social reality as "world of constant conflicts in need of a revolution" (Burman 2023, 3). For this reason, we welcome Burman's (2023) attempt to build a bridge between ideal and non-ideal social ontology to produce a more thorough and objective understanding of social reality.

Burman argues that ideal social ontology has worked with too limited a conception of social power that essentially reduces it to *deontic power*. This is a

1 These events can provide opportunities for political activities (such as collective deliberation) but are not inherently political.

type of power proper to social roles and institutions that can be defined in terms of deontic notions, such as commitments and entitlements or obligations and authorisations. (Think of, for example, entitlements and commitments that are typically attributed to a teacher. Teachers are certainly obliged to teach and are usually entitled to a certain number of days off.) In order to reconcile ideal and non-ideal social ontology, Burman advocates a form of pluralism about social power. While Burman does not deny that deontic power can produce injustice and oppression by itself, she follows ideal social ontologists in holding that deontic power is useful to explain the cooperative and harmonious side of society and suggests that other forms of social power can illuminate forms of oppression that are not explained by deontic power. These forms of power include what she calls "telic power," "spillover power" and "structural power" (see mainly ch. 6). Since the introduction of telic power constitutes Burman's (2023) most original and interesting contribution to this debate; we will focus on it in this work.

Burman contends that the appeal to deontic normativity alone cannot capture crucial aspects of non-institutional social statuses, such as gender and race, which are pivotal to the analysis of social injustice and oppression. For the normative nature of these social roles depends not on authorisations and obligations or entitlements and commitments, but on certain shared ideals—for example, those of femininity and masculinity and those of black people and white people. Burman contends that the individuals who have these social roles are subject to the normative force of these ideals in the sense that perceived distance from them will affect—positively or negatively—the ability of those individuals to produce certain outcomes in certain domains. The individuals whose abilities are affected in this way are said by Burman to have negative or positive *telic* power. For example, those who are perceived to be closer to the ideal of the white male will typically have positive telic power in many contexts, such as work and education.

We believe that Burman's project of employing the notion of telic power as an explanatory tool in social ontology is very promising, but we argue that much remains to be done to make it fully successful. First, there is a palpable tension between Burman's claim that telic power can be ontologically independent of deontic power and her examples, which suggests that these forms of power share the same basis. Second, it is not completely clear how telic power specifically helps non-ideal social ontologists explain oppression. We consider both problems. First, we argue that Burman's arguments that aim to show that telic power can exist in the absence of deontic power are unsuccessful. Burman contends that this is possible because some social roles

involving telic power can exist independently of institutions conceived of as sets of constitutive rules, which are—in her opinion—the source of deontic power. We argue that Burman's cases are unsuccessful because they disregard the view that all social roles involve deontic power, whether or not they are institutional. We show that this view is sufficiently plausible and must, therefore, be taken into consideration. Second, we argue that while the exercise of deontic power requires a collective recognition of the social roles of the interacting agents and, therefore, a recognition of the associated norms, the exercise of telic power does not require recognition of the relevant norms. This is why invoking telic power is particularly useful in explaining how social oppression and injustice can arise. Lastly, we suggest that the relation between teleological normativity and forms of telic power has not been fully clarified by Burman and requires a deeper analysis.

In more detail, Section 2 introduces the notion of deontic power. Section 3 analyses Burman's view of teleological normativity. Section 4 details Burman's notion of telic power. Section 5 criticises Burman's views by investigating the link between telic power and deontic power. Section 6 clarifies the role of telic power in the explanation of social injustice and oppression. Section 7 concludes the paper by suggesting what should be done next.

2. DEONTIC POWER

Burman points out that when it comes to social power, the tendency to concentrate on deontic power—typical to ideal social ontologists—goes hand in hand with "a consensus-oriented view of social phenomena, rather than regarding them in terms of conflict and contestation" (Burman 2023, 176). John Searle is one of the most influential theorists of deontic power and the one to whom Burman explicitly constantly refers when considering this notion.

For Searle (2010, 147–8), agent A has power over agent A* about a possible action B if and only if A can intentionally get A* to do what A wants regarding B—i.e. doing B or refraining from doing B—whether or not A* wants to do it.[2] Within this general understanding of power, social powers—specifically intended by Searle as deontic powers—are the entitlements and commitments or rights and obligations agents possess in virtue of their social roles, where these rights and obligations are enacted when the agents behave

2 More accurately, the final specification, "whether or not A* wants to do it" is intended by Searle as a triple disjunction: even if A* does not want to do it, or A* would not have wanted to do it without A's getting A* to want to do it, or A* would not have wanted to do it if A had not prevented A* from knowing all available options.

in accordance with what is required by the social roles.[3] Searle conceives of these roles specifically as special agential functions—a particular sort of "status function" to use Searle's terminology—which require the individuals who have them to exercise their agency or be subject to the agency of others by virtue of collective recognition.[4]

For Searle, status functions are brought into existence and assigned to individuals through particular speech acts that he calls "declarations" (which can be replaced by equivalent symbolic acts), where these declarations need to be collectively recognised to work.[5] Precisely, in order for a status function R to exist, the members of the relevant community need to collectively recognise the declaration of a *constitutive rule* with this form (Searle 2010, 13):

X's meeting conditions K in context C constitutes being R,

where recognising this involves recognising that X's being R requires both X and those who interact with X to satisfy the rights and obligations associated with R.[6] Thus, for example, the members of a community can collectively recognise a declaration that states that any person X under conditions K, specifying that X has exchanged certain vows with another person (e.g. "I now take you to be my wedded wife/husband") in the presence of an authorised registrar and witnesses, counts as (R) married with that person, in the context C of the whole community, where being married involves having specific commitments and entitlements. Similar examples, for Searle, can describe the creation of the status functions of judges, lawyers, lecturers, referees, spokespersons, parliamentarians, the prime minister, but also friends and parents.

For Searle, *positive* deontic powers consist of having certain rights, entitlements or authorisations, and *negative* deontic powers consist of having certain obligations, commitments or duties (Searle 2010, 7–11). For instance, a lecturer typically has the right to use an office and the university computer system and the obligation to teach students and hold office hours. A police

3 The point of having deontic powers is to regulate relations between people. In this category, Searle includes, for instance, rights, authorisations, permissions, privileges, entitlements, penalties, duties, and commitments.

4 Status functions, in general, for Searle, can also be assigned to things, like money, which are not agents.

5 Searle focuses on *type* status functions rather than *token* status functions.

6 In general, constitutive rules constitute an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules. Think, for example, of the rules constitutive of chess: playing chess is constituted in part by acting in accordance with these rules.

officer typically has the right to search other citizens in certain circumstances, and these citizens have the obligation to satisfy the police officer's request to be searched in the same circumstances. Importantly, deontic powers, for Searle, do not work through physical force; they instead provide desire-independent *reasons* for action.[7] They get one to do something without using coercion in virtue of one's recognising a status function—one's own status function or someone else's status function.

3. TELEOLOGICAL NORMATIVITY

Burman suggests that appealing to other forms of social power can allow us to explain important instances of injustice and oppression in the social world. She reminds us that *deontic* normativity exists in the social world because "the mere recognition of a status function as binding gives rise to reasons for action" (Burman 2023, 178). However, Burman notes that some social ontologists have discussed in their work another type of normativity, called "teleological."[8] Here is her explanation of how this type of normativity emerges:

> Having imposed this status function on someone implies that one can *evaluate* how well this person fulfills this status function: [for example,] is she an excellent, good, or bad professor? The possibility of evaluating people in this way suggests that there is a different type of normativity than deontic in the social world, namely, teleological normativity. (Burman 2023, 180)

To further clarify this notion, Burman refers to sociological research based on interviews with British working-class women, many of them housewives.[9] In one of these interviews, a housewife confirms that she perceived herself to fail to meet the ideal of a good housewife in the eyes of a Health Visitor and even herself, where a good housewife in this context is "someone who has an impeccably clean home, respectable clothes, refined language and shows care and concern for others" (Burman 2023, 180–1). This example illustrates how a social norm related to an ideal against which individuals are measured works.

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7 A desire-independent reason for action is such that the reason is prior to the desire and grounds the desire. A desire-dependent reason for action is such that the desire is prior to the reason grounds the reason.

8 Burman's (2023) view of teleological normativity explicitly draws on Haslanger's work on gender norms (see mainly Haslanger 2012, 35–82) and Witt's work on gender and social normativity (see mainly Witt 2011).

9 See Skeggs (1997).

One's being perceived as living up to the ideal means that one is perceived as a good instance of that kind (e.g. a housewife), while one's being perceived as not living up to the ideal means that one is perceived as a bad instance of that kind. Burman clarifies that the norm of the ideal of a housewife is not *deontic* because

> […] the Health Visitor does have the *right* to visit the home, but she does not have the right to visit an impeccably clean home. Meanwhile, the interviewee does not have an *obligation* to have an impeccably clean home. (Burman 2023, 182)

This norm is *teleological*. While deontic normativity "concerns what we can demand of each other," "teleological normativity concerns ideals that we (sometimes) try to live up to and others expect us to live up to" (Burman 2023, 182). Burman acknowledges that being a housewife is partly defined by certain rights and obligations—for instance, housewives as such might have the right to certain governmental benefits, and they have an obligation to pay taxes on their benefits and take care of their children. Yet she points out that "some functions of being a housewife […] are defined in terms of a purpose or goal rather than in terms of rights and obligations" (Burman 2023, 182), which is why there exists an ideal that allows us to measure how well a person lives up to this purpose or goal.

Importantly, when it comes to teleological normativity, it is *other people's* perception that matters. Once others perceive an agent A as having a particular social role, A becomes evaluable under a norm or ideal that those people, but not necessarily A, share related to that role (Burman 2023, 186). However, just as deontic normativity, teleological normativity can provide reasons for actions. For example, a housewife might feel that she *ought to* conform to the ideal of a housewife used to assess herself, if she also shared that ideal (Burman 2023, 182–4).

Burman offers another example concerning the status function of being a professor. She notes that

> […] a professor might experience a conflict between the telic and the deontic aspects of her status function as professor. She might experience a conflict between her deontic powers, such as administrative obligations, and standards of excellence or ideals connected to the status function of being a professor, such as publishing high-quality work beyond what is strictly required. (Burman 2023, 184–5)

In this case, as in the case of the housewife, the ideal that gives rise to teleological normativity is not defined in terms of the rights and obligations that constitute an agential status function. Instead, that ideal involves goals that go beyond them—publishing *high-quality* research work goes beyond merely publishing research work. Both examples point to the existence of a facet of normativity that, although it intersects with deontic normativity, constitutes a distinct conceptual dimension. It seems that the obligations and rights of agential status functions are typically combined with certain goals and purposes that make teleological evaluation possible but which are not reducible to the fulfilment of these obligations and rights.

4. TELIC POWER

Although Burman draws on the work of other scholars in analysing deontic *normativity*, her conception of telic *power* is Burman original. As we saw, deontic power works through the agents' perceiving that, due to deontic normativity, they *ought to* perform a certain action due to recognising a status function. Telic power works "through agents' perceiving a different kind of ought (teleological normativity) related to an ideal," where this ought "involves a coercive dimension … as well as a certain kind of 'pull-effect' in the sense that agents strive to fulfil some of the ideals they embrace" (Burman 2023, 88). The coercive dimension here refers to the different types of sanctions—"ranging from strange looks to ostracism" (Burman 2023, 184) — that an agent would incur if they did not conform to the relevant norms.

Burman defines telic power in general as follows:

> **Telic Power.** An agent A has telic power in a domain if and only if there exists an ideal such that agent A can be measured against it and the distance perceived by other agents of A from the ideal affects A's ability to effect certain outcomes in that domain. (Burman 2023, 191)

Burman's intuition is that if A has telic power, this power *increases* with A's perceived *closeness* to the ideal, which has the effect of enhancing some of A's abilities, while it *decreases* with A's perceived *distance* from the ideal, which has the effect of restricting some of A's abilities. This is illustrated by the following two additional characterisations put forward by Burman:

> **Positive Telic Power.** An agent A has positive telic power in a domain if and only if agent A is perceived by other agents as living up to the ideal, as a good exemplar of the relevant kind, and this positively affects or enhances A's ability to effect certain outcomes in that domain.

> **Negative Telic Power.** An agent A has negative telic power in a domain if and only if agent A is perceived by other agents as not living up to the ideal; she is viewed as substandard or as a bad exemplar of the relevant kind, and this negatively affects or restricts A's ability to effect certain outcomes in that domain. (Burman 2023, 191)

To illustrate these concepts, let us consider the example of the housewife again. Burman suggests that if the housewife were perceived to be far from fulfilling the housewife ideal, the Health Visitor's evaluation could negatively influence the process aimed at determining whether the housewife should be allowed to keep custody of her children. (Let us suppose that the housewife is undergoing this process.) So, her actions could be restricted by preventing her from retaining custody of her children.[10] If this were to happen, the housewife would have negative telic power. Alternatively, if the housewife were perceived as close to fulfilling the housewife ideal, the Health Visitor's judgement could positively influence the process of determining whether she should be given back the custody of her children. If this happened or were to happen, the housewife would have positive telic power (Burman 2023, 189). In cases like these, the agent's telic power impacts, negatively or positively, the agent's deontic power.

Note that the above three definitions all refer to single *domains*. This is so because A's *positive* telic power in one context might end up restricting, rather than enhancing, A's ability to produce certain outcomes in another context, and A's negative telic power in one context might end up enhancing, rather than restricting, A's ability to effect certain outcomes in another. Burman imagines the case of Quentin, who is simultaneously a bodybuilder and a hard-working quantum physicist. In his gym, Quentin is viewed as an exemplar of the masculinity ideal shared among his gym peers. Consequently, he is elected a board member of the gym. In this domain, Quentin has positive telic power. However, in the academic domain, Quentin is not selected as department chair because this same masculinity ideal conflicts with the quantum physicist ideal (see Burman 2023, 190).

Burman (2023, 214) holds that telic power is transparent, based on ideals and norms that the community explicitly shares and overtly uses and

10 One concern might be this: since legal custody is a status role, a bundle of rights and duties, if having a clean household affects it, it must have legal standing. And if it does, then it is included in bundle of legal requirements of the status role of legal parent. However, if Burman's characterisation of the duties of the housewife with respect to the Health Visitor in the quotation above is correct, the Health Visitor does not have a legal right to deny her custody on the basis of the house not being immaculately clean.

works through the perceptions of normative reasons. She argues through examples that the notion of telic power captures important aspects of the social world. For instance, invoking negative and positive telic power can explain the fact that, about three decades ago, a female applicant for a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Medical Research Council in Sweden had to be 2.5 times more productive than the average male applicant to receive the same competence score. The Medical Research Council members had no *obligation* to give competence scores based on gender. So, appealing to deontic power is not helpful in explaining this fact. The explanation that invokes telic power is based on the plausible assumption that the shared *ideal* of the researcher among the members of the Medical Research Council was male (Burman 2023, 193–4). In this case, as in the housewife cases, the telic power of the agents—i.e. the applicants—impacted negatively or positively their deontic powers—negatively for females and positively for males.[11] Burman also suggests that this interaction between telic power and deontic power can clarify certain *feedback loops* typical of the social dimension. In particular, it is plausible that the original negative telic power of female applicants and the original positive telic power of male applicants were reinforced by the unbalanced upshots of these academic competitions. For the gender of those who are known to receive more research fellowships certainly contributes to characterising the collective ideal of the researcher (Burman 2023, 195).

Burman's notion of telic power appears to be a useful tool to shed light on the phenomena of social injustice and oppression investigated by non-ideal social ontologists and to complement the methodological approach of ideal social ontologists, which tends to overlook these phenomena. However, as we will see shortly, Burman's views are not free from internal difficulties and call for further explanation and analysis.

5. HOW DEONTIC POWER AND TELIC POWER ARE RELATED

An initial question concerns Burman's thesis, presupposed in her examples, that the constraint and enablements of agential status functions are typically combined with goals and purposes that make teleological evaluation possible, but these goals and purposes are not reducible to the fulfilment of those constraints and enablements. All this seems plausible at first glance, but why? Since Burman is silent on this, we venture to sketch one possible explanation. As we have seen, status functions exist because (among the satisfaction of other

11 One might wonder, however, whether the problem was instead that the members of the council had an *implicit bias* against women.

conditions) they are collectively *recognised*. Thus, status functions are in many cases accompanied by beliefs about their existence. Now, consider two things: first, for many human beings, it is virtually impossible to believe that something exists without trying to make sense of it. Also, status functions emerge to serve particular social purposes. They shape and orient social practices: they resolve coordination problems, foster cooperation and integration, help distribute information and resources, and so on (cf. Searle 2010, 58–9). In light of all this, it is plausible that the beliefs that accompany status functions and try to make sense of them normally involve a reflection on the purposes of these functions. Once these purposes are identified (which is always, in part, a matter of interpretation of social practices), it is possible to conceive of worse and better ways to satisfy these goals. The better ways correspond to the *ideal* goals that typically exceed what is required by the obligations and the rights of the agential status functions.[12]

To illuminate the link that Burman sees between deontic power and telic power, further issues must be addressed. Burman insists that "there are key differences that make clear that telic power is distinct from deontic power" (Burman 2023, 191) and provides some arguments that aim to identify various senses in which telic power and deontic power differ. While we agree with Burman that telic power is distinct from deontic power, we question her stronger claim that telic power is independent of deontic power.

To begin with, Burman contends that telic power is distinct from deontic power because "a person can be seen as fulfilling an ideal to a greater or lesser degree: there is a gradual scale." Consequently, it makes sense to speak of stronger or weaker telic power—that is, to conceive of telic power as a *scalar* property. On the other hand, "having an institutional right, a positive deontic power, is *binary*; a person either has the right to receive a salary in virtue of being an employee or does not" (Burman 2023, 192, our emphasis). We find this argument straightforward. To show that telic power differs from deontic power, Burman also adduces the possibility of an "ought-remainder." Consider again the example of the professor who has fulfilled all her institutional obligations but still believes that she ought to do more to satisfy standards of excellence or ideals related to her role as a professor. As we have seen, Burman contends that it is *this* type of teleological ought—which depends on an ideal and cannot be reduced to a deontic ought—that essentially characterises telic power

12 Reflecting on the purposes of a status function might lead people to modify the status function itself to better satisfy these goals (see Roversi 2021). But things can go the other way around too. One feature of certain status functions is that they trigger a continuous reconfiguration of their goals.

(Burman 2023, 192). Given that the kind of normativity that characterises telic power cannot be reduced to the one that characterises deontic power, there is good reason to consider these two types of power as different. Again, all this looks straightforward to us.

Burman also argues that since telic power requires only ideals that work as social norms but no status function to exist, it can exist without deontic power (Burman 2023, 192). Garcia-Godinez (2024) notices that this conclusion looks prima facie incoherent, given what Burman's examples aim to show. Think again of the examples of the housewife and the professor. What they aim to show is that—to use Burman's own words—"once we have imposed a [status] function on someone or something […] it becomes possible to evaluate that person or thing according to a standard" (Burman 2023, 189). This means that once a status function is imposed, there is deontic power, and therefore, there is also telic power; so, telic power seems to depend on deontic power. Burman makes claims like this again and again in her book. A quick way to dismiss this difficulty as merely apparent would be to insist that Burman's last quote states only a *sufficient* condition for the existence of telic power (or at least teleological normativity) and not a necessary condition for it. Yet the problems run deeper than this, as Burman's claim that telic power can exist without deontic power appears questionable in itself. The very fact that she relies on examples like those described suggests that it is hard to think of cases in which telic power is disconnected from deontic power.

Searle (2010, 23) takes the concept of status function and the concept of *institutional* fact as coextensive, and Burman appears to do so as well. Hence, whenever Burman speaks of status functions, she refers to structures of commitments and entitlements that can exist only within institutional contexts. Why does Burman think that telic power can exist without status functions and institutions? She claims that this is true because (1) "there can be non-institutional social statuses displaying teleological normativity and telic power" (Burman 2023, 192). For example, according to Burman, (2) in Western liberal democracies, "there are no institutional rights and obligations attached to the social role of being a woman or a man, but there are certainly ideals of femininity and masculinity" (Burman 2023, 192). Further evidence would also be that (3) we can imagine "a society with only ideals but no institutional rights and obligations" (Burman 2023, 192). We believe that all three of these points are problematic.

Let us start with (1). Can there be non-institutional social statuses,[13] in Searle and Burman's sense, displaying teleological normativity and telic power? We think so, but we doubt that this fact alone shows that telic power can exist without deontic power, for these non-institutional social statuses could still display *some type* of deontic normativity and deontic power.[14] To conceive of a type of deontic normativity and power independent of institutional statuses, one should acknowledge that there are ways of thinking of deontic normativity and power other than those described by Searle. This acknowledgment is not new to either ideal or non-ideal social ontology. For example, Gilbert's (2014) notion of *joint commitment* is the notion of a *deontic* status that confers some type of deontic power (see Burman 2023, 29–33, 177), but joint commitments do not need institutions to exist. On the other hand, Jenkins (2023) supports a comprehensive conception of deontic normativity, according to which deontic normativity "can be subtle and implicit" and is characterised "by the presence or absence of tendencies for normatively laden corrective responses, rather than by people explicitly thinking of others as having rights, duties, and so on" (Jenkins 2023, 139), where these tendencies for normatively laden corrective responses—according to Jenkins—result in forms of deontic power.

In what follows, we first provide some examples taken from everyday social reality that suggest that deontic normativity and power can exist independently of institutional statuses. We then offer some general observations to

13 Note that these *social statuses* for Burman are not generic social classifications, but social roles, although non-institutional social roles. In her (2023), when analysing teleological normativity and telic power, Burman uses "social status" and "social role" interchangeably.

14 One objection to this claim could be that Burman (2023) might *define* deontic normativity and power as institutionally grounded. In this case, whatever type of normativity and power were displayed by non-institutional social statuses, there would be no ground for a dispute. However, Burman does not seem to make the alleged institutional character of deontic normativity and power a matter of definition. First, she never says so. Second, Burman is a pluralist about social normativity and power in general; this suggests that she might be open to a form of pluralism about *deontic* normativity and power. Third, from some passages it transpires that Burman does not consider contradictory the claim according to which deontic normativity and power can depend on non-institutional social statuses. For example, Burman (2023, 177) stresses that Gilbert's joint commitment (which does not need any institution to exist) is a deontic notion. Furthermore, Burman writes that Haslanger's analysis of gender and race (which are not conceptualised by Haslanger as institutional statuses) "involves hierarchy as an essential element and deontic power is plausibly a key component of hierarchies" (Burman 2023, 179). It is also worth stressing that, if Burman defined deontic normativity and power as institutionally grounded but there were non-institutionally grounded forms of normativity and power recognisable as deontic, one could argue that Burman's definitions are defective as analytical tools because they are arbitrarily limited in scope.

make sense of these examples by hinting at one general framework that supports a non-Searlean conception of deontic normativity and power.

Following Searle (1995, 114; 2010, 10), Burman (2023, 192, note 8) understands "institution" as a system constitutive rules. Searle (1995, 88; 2010, 91) maintains that the existence of institutional facts, and thus institutions and status functions, requires the existence of constitutive rules that have been codified (e.g. into explicit laws) or that are at least codifiable. Searle generously includes among the latter those that, in his opinion, are at the basis of social phenomena such as friendship, dates, and cocktail parties. He emphasises that

> […] such institutional patterns could be codified if it mattered tremendously whether or not something was really a cocktail party or only a tea party. If the rights and duties of friendship suddenly became a matter of some grave legal or moral question, then we might imagine these informal institutions becoming codified explicitly. (Searle 1995, 88).

However, Searle tends not to include among institutions the referents of expressions such as "intellectual" and "celebrity," which also individuate social roles (see Searle 1995, 89; 2010, 92).[15] Since Burman adopts Searle's notion of institution, when she states that there can be non-institutional social statuses that exhibit teleological normativity and telic power, it is possible that she thinks of, among other things, statuses such as being an intellectual or a celebrity. We agree that these statuses are not institutions in Searle's sense and are associated with ideals of these types of persons, but we doubt they do not involve any deontic power whatsoever. Although Searle links deontic power to constitutive rules and status functions, arguably, the former does not require the latter to exist. For it seems prima facie plausible that even social roles that are not institutionalised or not institutionalisable through collectively recognised declarations can come with some type of entitlement and commitment that constrain the behaviour of the agents who fill these roles and of those who interact with them. Indeed, this seems to be true of the roles that Searle counts or would count as non-institutional.

For example, intellectuals are typically *entitled* to express their opinions in certain public contexts—such as talk shows on cultural problems, cultural magazines, debates on topics in history, literature, art, etc., various types

15 Searle concedes that there is a gradual transition, and not a sharp dividing line, between social facts in general—requiring collective intentionality but not necessarily codified or codifiable constitutive rules—and the special subclass of institutional facts.

of specialised podcasts, and so on—on issues deemed relevant. In these or other contexts, intellectuals are also typically taken to be *committed* to having an opinion about certain facts considered important in their culture or society, and being able to defend their opinion.[16] It seems plausible that these types of entitlements and commitments are normative statuses that result from enculturation and socialisation, and not simply psychological states. Such entitlements and commitments can be seen as constituents of informal, unstable and not fully defined social norms implicit in social practices that regulate the possible actions that can be performed by those who occupy the role of intellectuals and by those who interact with them in the relevant contexts.[17] Evidence of the normativity of these statuses is, for example, that other community members can blame people who do not allow certain intellectuals to participate in certain events, and intellectuals who do not have opinions or cannot defend their opinions about certain facts considered socially or culturally relevant can also be *blamed* by other community members. Different communities and societies have different social practices passed down from generation to generation that shape the role of intellectuals and typically do not achieve full institutional status.[18] One might wonder whether the informal deontic powers that arise from the social role of intellectual have the same normative force as institutional deontic powers. This force is clearly contextually variable—for example, in a presentation in a bookstore, an intellectual can afford to dodge questions that he or she could not afford to

16 It could be argued that, at times, the man in the street may have a right to express his or her opinion in contexts such as these. However, in these cases, the rights and responsibilities of an ordinary citizen would differ from those of an intellectual. For example, intellectuals would have a stronger obligation to provide reasons for their opinions. Suppose an intellectual failed to meet these expectations. In that case, he or she would be sanctioned much more significantly than a citizen would be.

17 It should be clear that we are not using "intellectual" as an adjective to refer to a person who has a highly developed intellect. We do not think that when we simply take a person to possess highly developed mental capacities, we attribute to him or her a *social* status. The social category we are trying to capture describes individuals who engage in the production or dissemination of ideas by interacting with others who entitle them to engage in such activities but also impose normative constraints on them. It is true that there are ambiguous uses of "intellectual." For instance, in private circles, families, groups of friends or colleagues, people might refer to a group member by calling him or her "intellectual." As long as this label refers to a social role, there must be informal social norms in place that regulate the interactions between the intellectual and the other group members *similar* to those described above but within the group.

18 Searle (2010, 92) alludes very briefly to what he calls "public intellectuals" as a possible upcoming institution in the United States. It is not entirely clear what Searle has in mind, but what we have described here as the social role of intellectual is not an institution.

dodge in a debate during a more important public event.

Let us turn to the social status of celebrity. Many would agree that being a celebrity involves an informal *entitlement* to behave like a celebrity. Although it is not an institutional role, being a celebrity gives the person who has this status a social power, in the sense of affordance–that is, possibilities for action in the social sphere that most people do not possess. This includes, for example, asking for special treatment in hotels, restaurants, shops, etc. Requests like these happen all the time: celebrities complain about not having the best room in a hotel, not seeing their photo on the front page of a magazine, or not being invited on television programmes. Celebrities do this because they are aware of certain practices, which they may have learned by observing the behaviour of other celebrities and those around them, that give them an informal *entitlement* to have all these things.[19] And this comes together with ordinary people often granting such special treatment to celebrities, *authorising* them to have what they ask for, where these normative attitudes also seem to have been socially learned.[20] Thus, here too, the entitlements and commitments mentioned do not appear to be merely psychological states, but statuses informed by social normativity. Furthermore, analogously to institutional deontic powers, contexts are essential to regulate the informal deontic powers of celebrities. For example, a celebrity is not entitled, as a celebrity, to receive favourable treatment from the Department of Work and Pensions.

Along similar lines, Katharine Jenkins (2023) has suggested that *communal properties* come with informal deontic constraints and enablements. "Communal property" is a category introduced by Ásta (2018) that refers to social properties that are not institutional. Jenkins has provided a nice example of deontic normativity that appears to be attached to the communal property of being an un-cool person:

> Suppose that I, a decidedly un-cool person, were to attempt to set a new trend by saying the following: "On Wednesdays, we wear pink!" Now, it may well be that other people will have a corrective response along the lines of "Oh yeah, says who?" In other words, who do I think I am to attempt to set such a trend? Not only will I not manage to get everyone else to join me in wearing pink on Wednesdays, but I will be treated as

19 It is worth mentioning that a celebrity can acquire institutional power as a "public figure" in the context of defamation actions and litigations on the right to privacy. For example, legally recognised celebrities as "public figures" have the right to withhold information, such as personal information, from the public domain.

20 Furthermore, many ordinary people feel informally *entitled* to ask for autographs and selfies from celebrities.

> having overstepped the mark in even suggesting it. (Jenkins 2023, 140)

This example suggests that un-coolness can be a matter of informal deontic constraints. Un-cool people do not possess the informal *right* to start a new trend—that is, they are informally *prohibited* from starting a new trend—because others do not *authorise* them to set the agenda. In social interactions, cool people have certain informal rights because others authorise them, whereas un-cool individuals are not authorised, so they do not have such rights. In the above quotation, the sanction "Oh yeah, says who?" suggests this. Examples like these can easily be multiplied.[21]

All of these examples can be explained if we think of social role norms in a way that does not consider them to be grounded in Searle's constitutive rules, but as being implicit in social practices. Our proposal is that social roles can be conceived of as sets of possible actions, or ways of doing things, nested in social practices, where social practices exist by virtue of the interactions between the agents involved in the practices.[22] In this framework, practices themselves are normative because they consist of actions and potential actions that can be judged by the interacting agents as having certain normative significance, such as being permissible, obligatory, required, prohibited, etc., where these normative features are brought into existence by the judgments of the interacting agents themselves through a process of mutual recognition. In this view, an action or possible action associated with a social role belongs to a social practice if and only if it can be considered to have normative significance by the interacting agents. Furthermore, the interacting agents acquire normative statuses, such as being committed or entitled to an action, when the action has normative significance in this sense. This conception of social role normativity can be seen as an extension of Robert Brandom's (1994) account of the normativity of language practices to all social practices.[23]

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21 For another interesting example suggesting that belonging to a race involves informal obligations that amount to deontic constraints and enablements, see Jenkins (2023, 51).

22 This view resembles Witt's (2023), which conceptualises a social role as a bundle of ways of doing things, that is to say, a set of techniques socially transmissible defined in relation to the possible actions associated with the role.

23 The principal aim of Brandom's (1994) is to provide an explication of the normativity of meaning in terms of social practices in which the interacting agents institute their normative statuses through mutual recognition. For Brandom, language norms are implicit in language practices. Central to these practices is the game of *giving and asking for reasons*. Brandom maintains that A's asserting *P* comes with certain commitments and entitlements. For instance, it commits A to asserting the claims inferable from *P*, and rests on the presupposition that A is actually entitled to assert *P*. The game of giving and asking for reasons is possible only if each participant constantly check and keeps track of their

According to our conception, social role norms are continuously produced, reproduced and modified by the dynamic of mutual responsiveness that characterises the interactions of agents within the practices of a community or society. In other words, through participation in social practices, the agents develop an understanding of the normative boundaries that structure their social space in different contexts while being recognised as individuals who occupy the social roles they occupy and while they recognise others as occupying other social roles. This type of understanding and recognition of social role norms, which can involve some level of negotiation and adaptation of the norms themselves, principally occurs through various processes of socialisation and enculturation, some of which may last a lifetime. These processes involve all social roles in general: from being an intellectual, a celebrity, or an un-cool person, to being a student, a doctor, a wife, and so on.

In essence, the understanding and recognition gained through participation in social practices concern what moves are permitted or prohibited in different contexts, and what other moves are permitted or prohibited once certain moves have been made, for those who occupy certain social roles. This recognition is fundamentally a recognition of *social roles* and not of *ideals*: what is recognised or negotiated are behavioural standards, not norms of excellence. This is why the normativity involved is deontic rather than teleological. In some cases, the recognised social boundaries depend on role norms that have become stable and have been explicitly stated (e.g., in laws and regulations). In many other cases, however, boundaries remain partly indeterminate and depend on unstable social role norms of which the agents have mainly an intuitive or practical grasp, and that can be made explicitly only in part and with difficulty. Even so, in these cases, there can be processes of mutual negotiation and re-negotiation of these implicit norms that take place in people's interactive practices and behaviour.

Only when social role norms become sufficiently defined and stable in time and across different contexts—like in the case of those involved by the roles of student, doctor and perhaps friend—do institutions emerge. At that point, these role norms are liable to be institutionalised—perhaps, following Searle, through declarations collectively recognised within the larger

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interlocutors' language commitments and entitlements, by attributing normative statutes to them, and of their own language commitments and entitlements, by acknowledging their own normative statutes, in the different phases of the game. In his framework, commitment and entitlement respectively correspond to the traditional deontic primitives of obligation and permission/rights.

community which bestow status functions on people.

However, this does not mean that there are no entitlements and commitments or right and liabilities, and therefore no deontic normativity and power, before this stage. Quite the opposite—as the former discussion suggests—it seems plausible that even before this stage there are partly indeterminate and unstable entitlements and commitments that do not depend on constitutive rules and status functions. These entitlements and commitments are typically left implicit in practices, though they do constrain them. If this is correct, non-institutional social statuses—such as being an intellectual, a celebrity or an un-cool person—are characterised by *non-institutional* entitlements and commitments, which are nevertheless entitlements and commitments. These social roles involve, therefore, forms of *non-institutional* deontic normativity and power.

The view we have outlined might harmonise with one recently defended by Johan Brännmark that does not characterises social roles in terms of constitutive rules and status functions. Brännmark (2019) proposes that social positions in general can be defined in terms of Hohfeldian incidents—basically, distributions rights and liabilities—and so in terms of deontic concepts. Social positions thus characterised display deontic normativity and deontic power. Brännmark distinguishes between *formal* social positions, such as being "a property owner, a marriage partner, a citizen, a university professor, a medical doctor, and so on," and *informal* or *implicit* social positions, such as being "a friend or a lover, parent or child, leader or advisor, and so on" (Brännmark 2019, 1057). Perhaps some of these informal positions depend on stable and definite rules that *can* be formalised, but it is by no means obvious that this is true of all of them. Accordingly, we suggest that some of these positions could display what we have described as non-institutional deontic normativity and power.[24]

Our conception of non-institutional social normativity allows us to retain Burman's insights into deontic and telic powers within a framework that appears to us more natural than that presupposed by her and Searle. We can neither articulate our conception in full nor provide an adequate defence of

24 We share with Brännmark the thesis that deontic normativity arises from the interaction between social agents. Brännmark, however, argues that both informal and formal social positions are institutions. Instead, in our framework, informal social positions arise as the relevant normative statuses are created by social interactions and can gradually transform into institutional positions as they become more stable over time and contexts.

it in this short paper.[25] However, we believe that we have done enough to at least demonstrate that it is a live option worthy of serious consideration. Burman points out that (1) "there can be non-institutional social statuses displaying teleological normativity and telic power" (Burman 2023, 192). If our conception of non-institutional social normativity is correct, this truth by itself is not sufficient to show that telic power can exist in the absence of deontic power.

As we have seen, Burman also argues that (2) in liberal democracies there are ideals of femininity and masculinity, but there are no institutional rights and obligations associated with the social roles of being a woman and being a man. Burman appeals to (2) to support the thesis that telic power can exist without deontic power. We think that (2) does not support this thesis because the social roles of being a woman and being a man have non-institutional deontic powers. However, here we want to point out another problem with Burman's argument. It is presumably true that the social roles of being a woman and being a man do not depend on constitutive rules and status functions. Yet, in Western liberal democracies, women and men are subject to some rights and obligations that are codified in laws and regulations and shape their social roles as women and men. For example, women have reproductive rights that men do not have. Women have the right to decide whether, when and by whom they become pregnant and to have equal access to health services, including pregnancy care, postpartum care, contraception and safe abortion. On the other hand, men have a duty to not interfere with and support these rights; basically, they must not impregnate women against their will.[26] Other examples—though perhaps more controversial—might concern segregation by gender in sports. For most sports, women and men can only participate in separate sports competitions; these obligations seem to depend, at least in part, on the assumption that men are physically stronger than women, which is a component of the ideals of femininity and masculinity.

Finally, let us turn to (3). Burman maintains that we can imagine a society with only ideals—that is, with only telic power—but no institutional rights and obligations. Can we really imagine it? We are not sure. It is worth noting that the most insightful and convincing examples of the existence of telic power provided by Burman (2023)—namely, the housewife case, Quentin case, and the Medical Research Council case—do not help us answer this

25 We develop more fully this view in our forthcoming paper "Internalism and externalism about social role normativity: the Hegelian model."

26 The recognition of these rights and duties, which depend in part on biological functions, does not commit their supporters to thinking of gender as a biological kind.

question affirmatively. For these examples always involve an agent A, who has *institutional rights and obligations*. These are all examples in which the distance perceived by other agents of A from the ideal does affect A's ability to produce certain outcomes in the precise sense of limiting or enhancing A's institutional rights and obligations.

But let us suppose we can imagine a society with telic power but no *institutional* rights and obligations. Would this support Burman's thesis that telic power can exist without deontic power? We do not think so. We can probably imagine a very simple society with no institutions. However, it would be impossible to characterise this ensemble of individuals as a society if it did not have at least some very basic and informal division of roles, since this type of division appears to be a necessary condition for the existence of any society. But then, again, it is not at all clear that these non-institutional roles would not be constrained by some *non-institutional* rights and obligations.

To conclude, Burman has not offered convincing reasons for believing that telic power and deontic power have different conditions of existence. Ironically, this is good news for Burman's project of finding an approach to social phenomena that stays away from the extremes of ideal and non-ideal social ontology. In fact, note that if telic power cannot be completely disentangled from deontic power, since the latter requires the existence of some type of recognition and cooperation, any social context in which telic power creates injustice and oppression should also accommodate a certain level of recognition and cooperation. Consequently, social reality cannot just be a "world of constant conflicts in need of a revolution" (Burman 2023, 3).

6. THE EXPLANATORY ROLE OF TELIC POWER

Burman contends that *opaque* power can be an effective source of injustice and oppression. Indeed, unjust and oppressive social structures can more easily be imposed on people when the power that creates them is not transparent: that is, its operation is not discoverable through mere reflection and observation at a micro level (see Burman 2023, 220–5).[27] However, this cannot be how telic power works, according to Burman, for she is very clear that telic power is just as *transparent* as deontic power (see Burman 2023, 214). But then, why should we follow Burman in holding that the appeal to telic power is particularly illuminating when we aim to explain harmful social phenomena? We submit that invoking telic power is particularly helpful in this case because the operation of telic power, unlike that of deontic power, does not require the

27 An important form of opaque power is what Burman calls "structural power."

agent to *recognise* the norms it depends on. The agent can have telic power—particularly negative telic power—even if he or she *firmly opposes* these norms.

We follow Searle (2010, 8) in interpreting "recognition" as an attitude that goes beyond mere knowledge or understanding of a norm because it also implies a form of *acceptance* of the norm that does not necessarily imply its *approval*. I can give consent to a norm—i.e. accept it—that is not in line with my ideas—i.e. that I do not approve of—because, for example, given my circumstances, this is the only thing I can do to pursue my goals or avoid difficulties. For Searle, recognition "goes all the way from enthusiastic endorsement to grudging acknowledgement, even the acknowledgement that one is simply helpless to do anything about, or reject, the institutions in which one finds oneself" (Searle 2010, 8). However, note that firm opposition to a norm or ideal N does not involve recognition of N in this sense. If I firmly oppose N, not only do I not approve of N, but I do not even accept N. While my recognition of N gives me a desire-independent reason to act, my firm opposition to N gives me no such reason.

An important difference between deontic power and telic power, which is not emphasised in Burman (2023), is as follows: as we have seen, deontic power does not directly act through mere coercion—e.g., violence, threat of violence or psychological pressure. Instead, it requires a collective recognition of the status functions of the interacting agents and, therefore, the recognition of the relevant obligations and entitlements.[28] Burman does endorse this conception of deontic power. For instance, she writes that some "forms of social power, such as deontic power, work through agents' perceiving that, due to deontic normativity, they ought to perform a certain action as a result of recognising a status function" (Burman 2023, 188). This is why there must be recognition when deontic power directly explains agents' interactions.[29]

28 Here is a clear statement by Searle:
"In typical institutional facts there are three elements: the X term, the Y term, and the status functions (deontic powers) attaching to the Y status. The status functions only work, they only function, to the extent that they are recognized. For someone who accepts the system, satisfying the X term automatically qualifies as satisfying the Y term and thus as having the Y status functions." (Searle 2010, 181)
Note that, according to the conception of non-institutional deontic power that we outlined above, it is also true that deontic power does not act directly through mere coercion. This is because, according to this conception, the normative statuses that convey deontic power are produced through *mutual recognition*.

29 One could object that this is not correct, since police power, for example, can act through mere coercion. But this objection confuses the explanation of the acts of police officers with the explanation of the *interaction* between police officers and coerced individuals. A police officer may decide to resort to coercion because of certain norms relating to his or her status

On the other hand, Burman (2023) does not hold that telic power generally requires the recognition of the relevant role ideals. Her definitions of telic powers state that agent A has telic power when the judgement of other agents about the distance of A from the ideal ends up affecting A's ability to produce certain outcomes. This can well happen when A does not recognise that her abilities should be limited because she does not recognise but openly opposes the ideal against which she is judged. It would be implausible to assume, for example, that the women applicants for a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Medical Research Council in Sweden generally shared an ideal of the researcher that sees the latter specifically as a man. Presumably, many of the women applicants firmly opposed such an ideal. This means that the application of telic power can involve some type of coercion.

To be accurate, when agent A does have telic power, A can oppose and thus not recognise four different elements recognised by the other agents who judge her: (i) A can oppose her identification by the other agents with a particular type of person; (ii) A can oppose the ideal of that type of person recognised by the other agents; (iii) A can oppose the judgement of the other agents about her distance from that ideal; (iv) A can oppose the decision of the other agents that her abilities to produce the relevant outcomes must be affected in that case. These forms of opposition can be combined. But even if A firmly opposed the judgments and beliefs of the other agents on all these points, if the agents enhanced or restrained A's ability to produce the relevant outcomes as a result of their assessment of A's distance from the ideal, this would still make A have telic power. Since telic power does not require these types of recognition, its exercise can be invoked to explain the production of fierce conflicts between those who limit the abilities of the members of a group (or agree they should be limited) and the group itself. This can illuminate the origin of important instances of social oppression and injustice.

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function that the police officer has recognised: this is an exercise of deontic power. However, in case of coercion, the interaction between the two individuals is not directly based on deontic power, in particular, the coerced individual obeys the police officer because of brute force, some kind of psychological pressure, prudential considerations or something else. As long as coercion is involved, this individual does not act in recognition of the status function of the police officer, so this individual's behaviour does not depend on his or her own negative deontic power. Note that this example illustrates one *indirect* way in which deontic power can produce oppression (suppose the police act in a moral reprehensive way). There are ways in which deontic power can *directly* produce oppression: suppose, for example, that an individual recognises and respects certain social role norms that are nevertheless immoral.

7. WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NEXT

Burman's introduction of the notion of telic power, distinct from deontic power, into social ontology makes the conceptual tools available to ideal and non-ideal social ontologists more powerful and promissory of analytic progress in this discipline. Although Burman's arguments for the claim that telic power and deontic power have different conditions of existence are inconclusive, we have clarified why the appeal to telic power can be particularly beneficial in explaining how social injustice and oppression are generated. Burman has provided excellent examples of how this notion can be used in this sense. Looking to the future, we draw attention to the fact that the relation between telic power and teleological normativity has remained partly opaque in Burman's work and, therefore, requires further investigation. Before concluding, let us briefly consider this matter.

There is an important difference between telic power and deontic power, not mentioned by Burman, which has arisen in the discussion of the previous sections. This difference concerns the link between telic power and teleological normativity on the one hand, and the link between deontic power and deontic normativity on the other. In short, all domains in which one is subject to deontic normativity are necessarily domains in which one has positive or negative deontic power, but it seems false that all domains in which one is subject to teleological normativity are necessarily domains in which one has positive or negative telic power.

To see this, first consider that if agent A is subject to deontic normativity in domain D, then A has some status function in D characterised by certain commitments and entitlements. The commitments and entitlements of A that regulate A's relations with other agents in D *are* the agent's deontic powers in D. This shows that all domains in which one is subject to deontic normativity are domains in which one has deontic power, which can be positive or negative.

Let us now turn to teleological normativity. For Burman, this is the normativity that governs people's judgments about how well or poorly an agent who has a given social role satisfies the shared ideal of that role. Consider an agent A who is subject to teleological normativity in a domain D. Accordingly, it must be the case that, in D, other agents can acknowledge that A has a given social role SR and can judge A's distance from the ideal of SR collectively accepted in D. Note that the satisfaction of these conditions alone does not entail that A has telic power in D. For instance, in some domain D in which A is recognised to have a social role SR, the judgment of the other agents of A's distance from the shared ideal of SR might perhaps *not* affect A's ability to

produce certain outcomes relevant for D. There may also be domains in which A is judged to be *close* to the ideal, but her abilities to produce certain outcomes are affected *negatively*, and domains in which A is judged to be *distant* from the ideal but her abilities to produce certain outcomes are affected *positively*. Let us consider an example of the last case. University students suffering from certain learning disabilities or neurodivergence, such as ADHD, dyslexia and forms of autism, are perceived by teachers and administrators as far from the ideal of student. However, for this very reason, these students usually have disability provisions such as extra minutes on exams and extended essay deadlines. This means that the abilities of these students to produce certain outcomes are enhanced rather than reduced.[30] Therefore, although these students are subject to teleological normativity at the university, they have neither positive nor negative telic power in the very same domain.

It would be important for future work if social ontology were able to illuminate the links that exist between teleological normativity and telic power. In particular, it would be interesting to understand what kinds of contexts, in general, are such that the existence of teleological normativity in them necessarily or typically translates into the existence of forms of telic power.

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30 These measures are specifically intended to counterbalance or neutralise disadvantages that other students do not have. However, this help translates into strengthening the abilities to produce certain outcomes of disadvantaged students.

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