# A Conception of Social Ontology[1]

(Forthcoming in Stephen Pratten [ed.] 2014)

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The purpose here is to describe and defend a programme in social ontology. It is a programme being carried though by a group of researchers in Cambridge[2]. Before turning to indicate how ontology is useful, and indeed can be reasonably carried through, an indication is provided as to how certain central categories are interpreted.

## Basic Categories

### *Ontology*

The term ontology[3] derives from Greek, with "onto" meaning "being", and "logos" usually interpreted as "science"; so that ontology, as traditionally understood, is the science or study of being[4].

The word being has at least two senses:

1) Something that *is*, or exists;
2) What it is to be or to exist;

It follows that if ontology is the study of being it includes at least the following:

1) The study of what *is*, or what exists, including the study of the nature of specific existents
2) The study of how existents exist.

This twofold conception is adopted here[5].

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[2] On debates surrounding some of the issues elaborated here see Edward Fullbrook, 2009. For comparisons with aspects of other projects see Pratten, 2009, 2013; Lawson, 2013b

[3] 'Ontology', or rather 'ontologia', appears to have been coined in 1613 by two philosophers writing independently of each other: Jacob Lorhard in his *Theatrum Philosophicum* and Rudolf Göckel in his *Lexicon Philosophicum.* Its first occurrence in English seems to be in Bailey's Dictionary of 1721, where ontology is defined as 'an account of being in the abstract'.

[4] As such ontology should be distinguished from both epistemology, which is a concern with knowledge, and methodology proper, a concern with method.

[5] In recent years the term ontology has also been widely used in the field of computer and information science. It is used to denote a formal language purposefully designed for a specific set of practical applications and contexts or environments. The aim is usually something like the construction of a formal representation of entities and relations in a given domain that can be shared across different contexts of application. This recent interpretation of ontology is not one I am especially concerned with here (for good discussions of it see contributions of Barry Smith, for example Smith, 2003).

*Scientific and philosophical ontology*

The just noted two forms of study are labelled *scientific ontology* and *philosophical ontology* respectively.

All features of reality can be viewed under the aspect of their being. Yet actual projects concerned with the study of what exists will necessarily be highly specific or restricted in focus. Features that get singled out for extended study at any point will depend on historical circumstance and, most especially, the situations, biases and interests of researchers. Because features or phenomena so singled out will depend on the interests of current science, and, in the case of non-social phenomena at least, be very often first identified in scientific study, the branch of study concerned with what is or what exists, that investigates the natures of particular existents, is reasonably distinguished as s*cientific ontology* (it is easily extended to include significant existents posited within, or presupposed by, *social* scientific thinking). Clearly, so understood scientific ontology, if irreducible to, is often carried out within, science itself.

Whilst scientific ontology seeks to elucidate specific existents and their natures, *philosophical ontology* focuses on all other aspects of being, or on the existents in their wider context, including connections between existents, common properties if any, their mode of being, and so forth.

*Ontological posits or presuppositions*

In some contexts, it is impossible to study the nature of putative existents apart from working with the scientific theories in which they are posited or presupposed. Superstring theory provides an example. Notice that to *identify* the presuppositions of such theories is not *per se* to be committed to them. The latter additional step requires an acceptance of the *plausibility* of those theories. Indeed many natural scientists do not at this point accept super-string theory as a plausible theory.

*An Ontology*

A convention adopted here is to refer to the specific results of ontological study as *an ontology*. The ambiguity involved of having the same word for both a form of study and its results is not uncommon; the same duality arises with such categories as history, geography, literature, science and much else; the appropriate meaning will usually be clear from context.

*Metaphysics*

The term "meta" in Greek means over, but it can also be interpreted as denoting behind or after[6]; whilst "physis" translates as nature.

It is the interpretation of meta as 'after' that most commentators take as significant in the morphology of metaphysics. For the latter term is usually said to owe its origins to the fact that the relevant part of Aristotle's *The Metaphysics* (ta meta ta phusika) (concerned with

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[6] Apparently this is because when X passes *over* Y it ends up either *behind* or *after* X.

"being qua being") was placed immediately *after* the part of the book called Physics[7]. However, it seems just as likely that the term had immediate intuitive appeal (and thereby achieved ready acceptance) as denoting the *purpose* of metaphysics, which is (or includes) reaching above or beyond nature (physis) as we immediately perceive it, to uncover its most basic components or fundamental features.

If the term ontology is sometimes used to study hypothetical worlds whether considered possible or not, as well as the world in which we live, metaphysics is usually reserved for the latter.

### *Regional and specifically social ontology*

A traditional goal of ontology has been to explore the possibility of a system of classification that is exhaustive in the sense that everything (we know about) can be interpreted as a particular instance[8].

Whatever view might be taken regarding the endeavour of seeking a comprehensive schema for the whole of reality, there may be good reason rooted in the nature of being to demarcate sub-branches of ontology, to instigate projects in *domain-specific* or *regional* ontology.

The view defended here is that there is a domain of phenomena reasonably demarcated as social reality or the social realm that provides a site for a viable regional project in ontology. One seemingly non-arbitrary basis for distinguishing sub-domains for projects in regional ontology is according to shared modes of existence of a set of existents. This indeed is the basis upon which the social realm is delineated by the Cambridge group.

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[7]Aristotle (384-322 BC) never himself used the term metaphysics (when he wishes to refer to the relevant part of his study he uses such terms as 'wisdom' (*sophia*), 'first philosophy' [*prōtē philosophia*] or 'first science [*prōtē epistēmē*]). Nor even did he assemble the work we now know as *The Metaphysics*. The latter consists of a series of fourteen books, all or most of the material of which was written by Aristotle, most likely during the later period of his work; but it was not assembled in this way by him. Specifically the material was written after his leaving the Academy, Plato's school in Athens (Aristotle became a pupil of Plato [427-347 BC] at the age of seventeen, and remained for twenty years, first as a pupil and later as a relatively independent researcher, leaving after Plato's death), and following his founding (in 335 BC) his own school of philosophy in Athens: the Lyceum or Peripatos. But only after Aristotle's death, and probably between 200 and 100 BC, were these fourteen books arranged and published in the order with which we are now familiar. In fact the title itself, 'the Metaphysics' was probably provided by Adronicus of Rhodos when he assembled the Collected Works of Aristotle in the first century BC.

[8] Whitehead sets out a version of philosophical ontology which accepts this goal in describing his approach to "metaphysics" identified explicitly as speculative philosophy:

"Speculative philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our system can be interpreted. By this notion of 'interpretation' I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme." (Whitehead, 1978[1929])

A similar position is taken by Mario Bunge who, as well as distinguishing philosophical (or speculative), from scientific, ontology, also, if somewhat unusually for a philosopher, notes that ontology can (as in social ontology, which I turn to below) be "domain" or "region" specific. Thus Bunge writes of ontology that it is:

"The serious secular version of *metaphysics*. The branch of philosophy that studies the most pervasive features of reality, such as real existence, change, time, chance, mind, and life. (…) Ontology can be classed into general and special (or regional). *General* ontology studies all existents, whereas each *special* ontology studies one genus of thing or process-physical, chemical, biological, social, etc. Thus, whereas general ontology studies the concepts of space, time, and event, the ontology of the social investigates such general sociological concepts as those of social system, social structure, and social change. Whether general or special, ontology can be cultivated in either of two manners: speculative or scientific. The ontologies of Leibniz, Wolff, Schelling, Hegel, Lotze, Engels, Mach, W. James, H. Bergson, A. N. Whitehead, S. Alexander, L. Wittgenstein, M. Heidegger, R. Carnap, and N. Goodman are typically speculative and remote from science. So is the contemporary *possible worlds* metaphysics." (Bunge 1999, pp. 200-1).

By *social realm* is meant that domain of all phenomena, existents, properties, etc., (if any) whose formation/coming into existence and/or continuing existence *necessarily* depend at least in part upon human beings and their interactions[9]. The predicate 'social' thus signifies membership of that realm or domain.

By *social ontology* is meant the study of the social realm in total. Clearly social ontology, as with all forms of social theorising, is part of its own field of study.

**Emergence, System and Organisation**

The division of reality into separate domains raises the question of the relationship between them, if or where they exist. The definition of the social domain as the set of all phenomena resulting from the interactions of human beings indicates a presumed relationship of a form of dependency in this case.

A central category of domain (inter)dependence is that of *emergence*. Generally put, this category is used to express the appearance of novelty, or something unprecedented or previously absent. Of particular interest in the project of ontology described here are emergent entities or *systems* that are formed through the *relational organisation* of pre-existing elements that (perhaps with modification) become, through their being so organised, components of the emergent entity or system. Emergent entities of this sort are thus dependent upon, in the sense of being formed out of, elements (typically also systems) that pre-exist them.

By a *system* is simply meant a compositional, in some sense coherent, totality, embedded in some context and (in contrast say to a mere collection or aggregate) possesses an organising structure (providing coherence) whereby the pre-existing elements become both interrelated as components as well as bound to features of the environment (on all this see Lawson, 2012, 2013a) .

**Ontological and causal reducibility and downward causation**

An interesting set of questions in any context is whether an emergent entity bears causal powers, and if so what is the nature of the relation of these emergent powers to those of its components. Two doctrines, those of *causal reduction* and of *downward causation*[10], are prominent in the relevant philosophical literature. The doctrine of causal reduction prioritises the causal powers of the components over those of the emergent totality, either synchronically or diachronically (in the latter case the causal powers of the totality are said to be explicable solely in terms of the causal interactions of the components).  The doctrine of downward causation prioritises the causal powers of the emergent totality over those of its components, by having the former somehow act upon the latter.  Both of these doctrines are rejected by the Cambridge group (see especially Lawson, 2013b). This rejection, in the context of specifically *social* ontology amounts to a rejection of prominent versions of both *methodological individualism* and *methodological holism* (see Lawson, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

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[9] The term 'necessarily' serves to exclude factors that in a sense depend on us but only contingently so, for example all the natural structures and life-forms that we could destroy but do not.

[10] Sometimes referred to as re-constitutive downward causation

**Why engage in ontology?**

So why bother with ontology as conceived here? In any domain where ontology, whether philosophical or scientific, can be successfully pursued, its value lies in bringing *clarity* and *directionality*, thereby facilitating action that is appropriate to context. For in theorising, as in all forms of human endeavour, it is quite obviously helpful to know something of the nature of whatever it is that one is attempting to express, investigate, affect, address, transform or even produce.

It is difficult to think of an area of life where knowledge of the nature of what is before us is not helpful. Ontological insight allows each of us to act differently in appropriate ways in the face of, say, a timid bird, a fragile antique, a bull, a tree, an expectant audience, a car, a hostile enemy, or an earthquake. If examples such as these seem obvious, there is no reason for expecting the benefits of ontological awareness, if feasible, to be any less significant when the phenomena of interest are those encountered or addressed in the process of scientific research.

Of particular interest here is the systematic study of the possibilities of, and for, human flourishing, as a likely essential condition of any meaningful projects of human emancipation.

In addition, the study of the ontological *presuppositions* of theories and practices of different groups and communities can facilitate an understanding of varying cultural systems or even of 'academic tribes' (see below).

The study of the ontological *presuppositions* further allows the identification of inconsistencies and other potential inadequacies in scientific and other forms of reasoning. This is possible just where the ontological presuppositions of different aspects of specific theories or practices remain unexamined by their scientific creators and so are not compared either to each other or to any explicitly expressed worldviews.

Other uses of ontology, particularly as they relate to understanding social phenomena, are postponed to the section on social ontology below, where relevant matters are discussed in a less abstract fashion. Suffice it to say at this stage that ontology (in conjunction very often with the study of ontological presuppositions) serves not as a substitute for science or substantive theorising but as a Lockean under-labourer for such activity[11]. Its essential contribution lies in helping clear the ground a little so that substantive theorising can proceed more fruitfully than would otherwise be the case.

In the Cambridge project it is philosophical ontology, and in particular social philosophical ontology, that so far has figured most prominently and extensively. However, this emphasis is seemingly uncommon in overtly philosophical circles and consequently appears in need of some defence. Indeed, many contributors, and in particular various twentieth century philosophers working in the analytic tradition, have insisted that scientific ontology,

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[11] The interpretation of philosophy or methodology as an under-labourer for science can fairly be attributed to Locke. It is a conception provided, albeit almost as an aside, in the 'Epistle to the Reader' of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Here Locke writes:

"The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity; but everyone must not hope to be a *Boyle* or a *Sydenham*; and in an age that produces such masters as the great *Huygenius* and the incomparable Mr. *Newton*, with some others of that strain, it is ambition enough to be employed as the under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge" (Locke, 1690 [1947], pp. xlii, xliii).

specifically analysis that centres on the elaboration of the content of scientific theories, is the only defensible way of proceeding. In fact, within this latter group, it is very often held that not only is philosophical ontology as conceptualised here infeasible, but it is only the theories of natural science concerned with non-social phenomena that are usable for gaining ontological insight. Furthermore, various contributors even take the view that any kind of ontology concerned with a world *apart* from our theories is out of the question. According to this group, all that we can sensibly seek to achieve is the identification of ontological posits, a project to which they sometimes, if somewhat misleadingly, give the label of internal metaphysics.

At this point it is insightful to address the arguments of the sceptics. In doing so defences are provided first of scientific ontology and then philosophical ontology where the focus is on non-social natural phenomena, and eventually of specifically social ontology both scientific and philosophical.

**In defence of scientific ontology**

To the extent that twentieth century analytic philosophy has accepted the project of ontology at all this is usually associated with the contributions of Quine, particularly his "On What There Is". In this paper, Quine (1948/49 [1953]) argues that to be is be a value of a bound variable. Bound variables are terms like 'thing', 'everything' 'something'. Quine's contention amounts roughly to the claim that to be is to be in the range of reference of a pronoun.

If (to use Quine's example) a person declares "some dogs are white" that person is actually saying that some things that are dogs are white; and for this statement to be true the things over which the bound variable 'something' ranges must include some white dogs. So in making the original utterance the person is accepting that white dogs are part of her or his ontological commitments

When using the phrase "to be is to be a value of a bound variable", Quine gives the impression that he is talking of what exists. However, it must be accepted that, first and foremost at least, he is indicating only how we determine whether someone (the author of a text) is committed to an existent. Thus, it could be argued that Quine is concerned not expressly with the way the world is, but only with ontological posits. Such an interpretation is feasible, and it has led some interpreters of Quine to argue that he is merely laying out a strategy that scientists and others should follow in order to clarify their ontological commitments.

If this was as far as Quine is prepared to go he would indeed belong to that strand of twentieth century philosophy, inspired by Immanuel Kant and including the likes of Rudolf Carnap, Hilary Putnam and Peter Strawson, that has conceived all ontology as properly concerned not with any ('external') world in itself but only with human concepts, languages or systems of beliefs.

For this group the objective is simply to elucidate the ontological commitments of selected sets of language users or belief holders. Traditional ontology aimed at the world beyond is considered impossible; it is said to necessitate an "external metaphysics" resting on a neutral perspective or "God's eye view" capable of comprehending reality as it exists independently of our knowledge frameworks and language. In rejecting such metaphysics, members of the

group in question argue that the most that can be undertaken is a study of the presuppositions or ontological commitments of specific theories or systems of belief, an activity termed "internal metaphysics".

Ontology in the sense of the study of any 'external' reality is thus replaced by the study of how a particular community or individual conceptualises a particular domain. The goal is merely to identify the conceptual presuppositions of sets of belief systems, languages and so forth. These proponents of "internal metaphysics" thus seek to uncover features *not* of the world beyond conceptions, but of the belief systems of their subjects; the goal is an account *not* of the broader reality but of such features as the taxonomic system presupposed by speakers of a particular language or by researchers working within a scientific discipline.

Actually, however, Quine does seem to go further than this. Not only does he practice 'internal metaphysics' but in accepting certain theoretical claims as reliable, he seems to be accepting the posited ontology as reliable as well. Further Quine suggests that the way in which we accept an ontology is similar to the way we come to accept a scientific theory, that is by seeking to accommodate within a simple conceptual scheme all the relevant facts in the domain, albeit with the proviso that ontologists seek to accommodate not empirical facts but 'science in the broadest sense':

> "Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least, insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged. Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense" (Quine, 1948/49 [1953], pp 16, 17, page references to the latter.)

Quine, then, at least in his influential 1948/49 [1953] contribution, appears seriously to engage in traditional ontology, the project of investigating the nature of reality. He treats it not as the study of scientific language, or some such, but of the world beyond (i.e., that does not merely reduce to) conceptions[12].

If this is a reasonable interpretation of Quine, problems arise through his strategy for achieving his (pragmatic) goal of limiting the scope of ontology. Although Quine seemingly does always believe that some posits, some ontological commitments inherent in reasoning, are informative of the way the world is, with the passage of time at least, he is found suggesting that this is so only of some very special forms of reasoning. Thus, by the time of his "Word and Object", Quine (1960) is suggesting that the entities we quantify over, and certain predicates we use, are indeed indispensable in everyday language, but have no ontological significance.

Rather he distinguishes a top rate conceptual system (basically non-social natural science "properly formalised") from a "second grade conceptual system" and simply asserts that only our first grade conceptual system provides a serious or reliable account of what the world contains. Thus Quine (along with Paul Churchland, Bernard Williams and various others)

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[12] Of course, if Quine is a realist, his emphasis on the empirical under-determination of theories and of the under-determination of translations means that he is very cautious about allowing that anything can actually be known, as opposed to being capable of being ranked according to pragmatic use.

insists that only our best scientific theories about the world say anything seriously about what there is. Later, describing his position as *naturalism,* Quine writes:

> "Naturalism looks only to natural science, however fallible, for an account of what there is and what what there is does. Science ventures its tentative answers in man-made concepts, perforce, couched in man-made language, but we can ask no better." (1992, p. 9)

Putnam (2004) amongst others thinks this signals the death of ontology. He observes that many of us (including apparently Quine) say things like 'Some passages in Kant's writing are difficult to interpret'. According to Quine's earlier reasoning, such assessments commit us to the existence of such things as 'passages that are difficult to interpret' as well as correct and incorrect interpretations of passages. Putnam reasons that, because the interpretation of text is not part of our best scientific theories, the later Quine and sympathisers must conclude that "passages which are difficult to interpret do not exist" (Putnam, 2004, p. 13). Finding such a conclusion to be absurd, Putnam concludes that ontology has received a blow from which there is no recovery.

There are, though, certain features of the various lines of reasoning in play here that are less than compelling:

First, even if it were acceptable to hold that only theories belonging to a top rate conceptual system ([non-social] natural science properly formalised) provide serious or reliable accounts of what the world contains, it would not follow that things posited in a "second grade conceptual system" need not exist. It is one thing to suggest that only our best theories give us *reliable* access to what there is; it is another to say that nothing exists that are not posited by these theories, and in particular that the posits of other second grade theories must not exist. After all some entities posited in first grade science may also be posited in some "second grade" conceptual system or theory as well. Furthermore, where or if ideas originate as a second grade theory which is later transformed into a first grade one, the reasoning of our philosophers would seem to imply that the entities so posited did not exist until the acquisition of first grade status of the theory brought them into existence. This is hardly an implication that these would-be scientific realists would want to endorse. In short, even accepting the dualistic thinking of these philosophers the mere fact of an entity being posted in some "second grade" theory implies nothing of necessity about its existence.

Second, who is to say that the interpretation of texts is not part of our best scientific theories? This presupposes a conception of 'best' and of 'scientific' that is not provided.

Third, who is to say, or by what criteria are we to stipulate, that theories considered (by whom?) to be our "best scientific" ones, are the only ones suitable for the (ontological) task at hand? None of the philosophers in question provide any insight on this. It is widely acknowledged that many theories formulated in the social science academy, particularly economics, are unreliable. But the same is not obviously true of lay theorising. Indeed, when eventually the social realm is examined, it will be observed that it is more often the insights of lay theorising that inform the theories of economists rather than the other way around; it is lay theorising and understanding that constrain economists to posit certain real world categories/entities such as: markets, money, firms, institutions, technology etc.

Fourth, what anyway is the problem of allowing that things like "passages that are difficult to interpret" exist, are real, are a part of being? Why should our accepting their reality signal

the death of ontology? Quine clearly does not want to grant existence to too many things. But this is merely an *a priori* or pragmatic preference. Of course, if we refuse to adopt Quine's (arbitrary) stance we must accept that ontology so conceived has an enormous field of enquiry. Indeed, it is the whole of being. But this merely means that in order to progress it is necessary, as here, to delimit any particular ontological project pursued. There is no obvious problem of principle with this. It just entails that we need to be clear about our field-delimiting strategies.

So there is no compelling case here to conclude that ontology is dead. At least a version of scientific ontology is found to be viable. As long as we are in possession of theories widely regarded as reliable, whose content can serve as premises for ontological analysis, there is reason to suppose that the presuppositions uncovered can relate to a reality beyond conceptions. Where this is not so then we can accept that, when employing the method of Quine, we are learning only about the presuppositions of scientists.

Scientific ontology, then, at least for the non-social natural realm seemingly remains feasible. However, it is argued below that it is possible to go significantly further. And it is essential that this is so. For, amongst other things, to the extent that the objects of scientific theories are discipline or even sub-discipline specific, the relations between such entities inevitably fall outside the domain of ontology as Quine so narrowly perceives it. These are matters addressed shortly. To this point, the aim has been merely to establish that scientific ontology is not everywhere ruled out on principle. The objective next is to defend philosophical ontology. And this may seem to be the harder task. For it is widely held that this sort of philosophy, before all others, is necessarily *a priori* and transcendent. The goal here is to indicate that such a fear is unfounded.

**In defence of philosophical ontology**

The contention to be defended here, then, is that philosophical ontology need not be dogmatic and transcendent, but rather can be conditional and immanent. Quine allows that the theories of natural science constitute a legitimate entry point for scientific ontology just because, or where, they are taken as reliable. Reliability of entry points is the key here. But in seeking such reliability we are *not* constrained to consider, with Quine, only those claims that express the content of theories. It is just as legitimate, for example, to commence from any feature of experience regarded as adequate or successful to the relevant domain of reality, including most especially those concerning *human practices*.

Of course, once this is recognised, it can be seen that ontology need not be restricted either to scientific (as opposed to philosophical) ontology or indeed to the study of non-social phenomena. Philosophical ontology at least as conceived here, aims at generalised insights, and reliable conceptions of human practices and so forth can be sought that too are reasonably generalised, including those relating to successful natural scientific practices as well as to everyday social ones[13]

For example, to start with philosophical ontology regarding the non-social domain, it seems to be a relatively non-contentious reasonably general assessment that practices of well-controlled laboratory experimentation often produce event regularities that otherwise would not (and do not) occur. Moreover experimental results are also regularly applied outside of

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[13] The fact that the approach outlined here differs from that of (I might suggest generalises that of) Quine on such issues has been noted in an interesting paper by John Latsis, 2007.

experimental scenarios where event regularities are not in evidence. What are the preconditions of these two generalised features of practical experience? Let a system or scenario in which an event regularity is produced, or occurs, be described as *closed*; a domain of reality that comprises more than one ontological level (e.g., that does not consist only of events) be described as *structured;* and let any components of a system which can be insulated from (the effects of) others be described as *separable*. Making sense of the experimental production of an event regularity seems to presuppose that the experimental activity is concerned with a) manipulating an intrinsically stable, and separable, causal mechanism, and more specifically with b) successfully insulating such a mechanism from countervailing factors, so that its effects are not offset by countervailing mechanisms. Under these conditions, an event regularity is produced correlating the triggering of the mechanism and its effects. Similarly, a recognition that experimental insight relates to a causal mechanism rather than an event regularity explains how experimental results are successfully applied in where event regularities are not in evidence.

In other words, reflection on the conditions of experimental control reveals the domain of reality in question to be open (allowing the possibility of experimental closure), structured (constituted in part by causal mechanisms irreducible to events and their patterns) and separable.

Notice, then, that whilst reflection on a specific theory of science can provide insights about specific causal mechanisms (or whatever), reflection upon the ontological preconditions of certain generalised successful practices of science, this being an exercise in philosophical ontology, can provide more general insights, such as that the real world is characterised by such general properties as *structure, causality, separability* and *openness/closure*, and so on

### Transcendental reasoning

In the experimental case just examined, the reasoning moves from generalised observations about experimental practices to inferences concerning their conditions of possibility. Any argument that moves from certain generalised features of our experience to their conditions of possibility can reasonably be termed transcendental. It was mentioned above that the arguments of Putnam, Carnap and others in favour of an internalist metaphysics are inspired by Kant. And this influence stems in significant part from his use of the transcendental argument. Indeed, Kant explicitly employs transcendental reasoning in a project concerned with replacing (what he viewed as misguided) endeavour aimed at disclosing the nature of being by a set of investigations into the presuppositions of our knowledge of being. Hence to acknowledge a reliance on transcendental arguments here may seem confusing.

But as already noted these two activities – elaborating the structure of reality and identifying the presuppositions of our knowledge of being – need not be different projects, and specifically the latter can serve as a means to achieving insights into the nature of being. An incompatibility between the two projects arises for Kant only when, in his doctrine of transcendental idealism, he identifies the task of uncovering the presuppositions of knowledge with that of elucidating the conceptual structures in terms of which any knowable being must be thought. In this, Kant is thus conflating practices that are conceptually distinct. Once we disentangle them[14] we can accept transcendental reasoning just as fallible,

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[14] I am not even sure that the conceptual disengagement of transcendental argument from Kant's specific mode of application is particularly contentious. Thus I note that in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Brueckner opens his entry on *transcendental argument* as follows:

practically conditioned, investigation into some or other feature of our experience, a practice which in philosophical ontology takes the form of an investigation into generalised features of our experience, including of human practices (see Lawson, 1998).

A point that warrants emphasis, perhaps, for it is rarely noted even by those who accept the case for philosophical ontology, is that transcendental reasoning can be employed even where the practices initiating the exercise are considered inappropriate in some sense. For such an exercise can still give insight, albeit into the sort of reality in which the practices being recommended or adopted would be appropriate. In this case the conception of reality in question can be contrasted with any other presupposed by successful practices, and relevant inferences can be drawn[15].

There is no suggestion, finally, that use of transcendental reasoning is the only method of philosophical ontology; no presumption that philosophical ontology is somehow restricted to that method. However, this consideration of the workings of transcendental argument does serve to indicate that philosophical ontology can be (and of course the argument here is that it must be) conditional and immanent.

## Social ontology

If the Cambridge concern has been mostly with philosophical ontology, the particular or 'regional' concern is with social ontology. To recall, by *social ontology* is meant the study of the *social realm*, where the latter is taken as comprising those phenomena whose coming into being and/or continuing existence depends necessarily on human beings and their interactions.

The concern of the Cambridge Group is with the following two projects in particular:

1) *Social scientific ontology*: the study of what is, or what exists, in the social realm, including the nature of specific social existents of interest; and

2) *Social philosophical ontology*: the study of how social phenomena exist, their modes of existence, connections between social existents, common properties, and so on.

Although it has proven to be the case that insights of philosophical ontology have facilitated specific endeavours in scientific ontology, it is useful here to touch upon the latter project first.

## Social scientific ontology, an initial orientation

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"**transcendental argument**, an argument that elucidates the conditions of possibility of some fundamental phenomenon whose existence is unchallenged or uncontroversial in the philosophical context in which the argument is propounded. Such an argument proceeds deductively, from a premise asserting the existence of some basic phenomenon (such as meaningful discourse, conceptualization of objective states of affairs, or the practice of making promises), to a conclusion asserting the existence of some interesting, substantive enabling conditions for the phenomenon. The term derives from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which gives several such arguments" (p. 808).

Of course, although modern familiarity with transcendental argumentation derives from the manner it was taken up by Kant, its employment is found in philosophy stretching back through the middle ages to the ancient Greeks. Over time its interpretation has developed with new understanding just as has the concept of an atom and almost any other notion. And the interpretation accepted here is certainly continuous with that running up to the present day through Kant.

[15] Indeed, such a procedure has been consequential in modern social ontology, especially in relation to the study of the practices of modern economists (see e.g., Lawson, 2003, chapter 1).

Whatever the extent to which philosophers have disagreed amongst themselves over the possibilities of ontology with regard to the non-social natural realm, there has tended to be a fair measure of agreement (though it is by no means universal) that social ontology is more or less a non-starter[16].

There is one obvious reason for this widely-shared assessment. Not only do the social sciences appear to be largely explanatorily unsuccessful, even by their own standards, but also they constitute a veritable cauldron of claims and counterclaims devoid of anything approaching consensus, and so are seemingly quite unable to provide potential entry points for ontological reasoning. Nowhere is this more obviously the case than within the discipline of modern economics.

Even so, and whatever the inherent difficulties facing projects in social ontology, there is actually one advantage that social scientific ontology possesses over its non-social counterpart. This is that whilst the entities of (or posited within) natural science (e.g., super strings, quarks, tanon-neutrinos, black holes) are at first unfamiliar, being the objects of conceptions formulated within scientific work in the course of explaining observed phenomena, resolving theoretical contradictions, and the like, and so in principle discoveries, the explanatory categories of social science, including economics, are typically already known (and agreed upon), at least under some description, prior to the work of science. This follows just because the social phenomena, unlike those of the non-social realm, emerge through human interaction and, *qua social phenomena*, depend on us, including our conceptions, for their continuing existence.

There is no suggestion here that lay conceptions are always adequate to their objects, of course. The claim is rather that we will likely already be aware of many, and possibly of most, social objects at some level. Thus, for example, any serious substantive account of aspects of capitalism will likely include categories such as markets, institutions, money, firms, production, all of which are prominent in lay conversation even if they often remain ill-defined and under-elaborated.

The primary problem with academic social scientific theorising lies not with identifying the categories (although it may yet be that a realistic analysis may reveal hitherto unrecognised forms of phenomena) but in the fact that such categories as appear vital are treated differently in competing theories.

Thus, in some social theoretic contributions the category *institution* denotes a pattern of behaviour, in others a set of rules, in still others a control system, and so on. Notoriously the category *money* is found to take different meanings in different paradigms, for example as a commodity, a unit of account, a means of exchange, a store of value, an accounting system, a marker of debts; whilst in the recently dominant paradigm of general equilibrium theorising no place is easily found for any notion of money, a feature recognised within that project as a failing (see e.g. Frank Hahn, 1982[17]).

Indeed, observations of the latter sort bear on the assessment indicated briefly above, that by and large it is the insights of lay theorising that inform the theories of economists and not the

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[16] There are of course exceptions to this, most notably the various contributions of Roy Bhaskar (e.g., 1989) and John Searle (1995, 2010)

[17] As Hahn (1982) starkly concludes "The most serious challenge that the existence of money poses to the theorist is this: the best model of the economy cannot find room for it." (p1).

other way around; it is lay theorising and understanding that constrain economists to posit certain real world categories/entities such as markets, money, firms, institutions, technology, etc., (or to interpret their absence as a failing).

So, in sum, if social scientific ontology has a head start on non-social scientific ontology in being in possession of knowledge of relevant categories even before turning to scientific theorising, its problem is that much social theorising around these categories is found to be unreliable, and certainly contested. As a result it is difficult to find social-scientific claims or theories that can safely be treated as providing suitable premises for the ontological elaboration.

A recognition of the latter state of affairs may even encourage a belief that social ontology is necessarily restricted to investigating ontological posits in the conceptions of social theorists; that in such circumstances ontological enquiry can at best claim to achieve merely a form of 'internal metaphysics', not an understanding of any 'external' reality beyond theorists' conceptions

It warrants emphasis that even if the latter sort of investigative endeavour were all that is feasible, it could still be of significant value. For to the extent that social theorists are committed to the content of their theories then such enquiry can be informative of the worldviews of social theorists, in the manner that psychology or anthropology can be informative of the worldviews of their subjects. Thus, it may be feasible to elaborate the worldviews of certain significant contributors, or, where a project is shared (and much modern economics, for example, is shared, encouraging Axel Leijonhufvud [1973] to talk of the 'economics tribe' in his classic 'Life among the econ'), of particular groups of social theorists.

For example, an ontologist concerned with the posits of modern economics could seek to tease out and elaborate the nature of the existents and interconnections presupposed in general equilibrium theory, or game theory, modern macro and micro economics, or new institutional economics, and so forth. The aim might be to elaborate how categories such as equilibrium, co-ordination, contract, competition, exchange, money, rationality, knowledge, beliefs, networks, society, etc., pan out in such conceptions. This is a project that may well prove attractive to those of an analytical philosophical bent.

**Ontology as history of thought**

This form of ontological analysis becomes a useful tool in the history of thought (on this see especially Lawson, 2005b). In particular, by examining a contributor's ontological preconceptions it is often possible to throw further light on the nature and/or meanings of her or his substantive claims and contributions, especially where the latter are found to be otherwise open to a large number of seemingly ill-grounded interpretations.

For example, through examining the ontological preconceptions of relevant contributors it has proven possible, in economics, to give support to (contested) assessments, for example, that John Commons did hold a theoretical perspective (see Clive Lawson 1994, 1995, 1996, 1999); that Friedrich Hayek's position changed significantly over time (Lawson, 1994; Stephen Fleetwood, 1995, 1996); that Thorstein Veblen did favour an evolutionary economics as a realistic approach and not merely because making economics evolutionary

would render it up-to-date (Lawson, 2003, chapter 9); that Karl Marx's theory (of capitalist tendencies) is not a deterministic theory (Fleetwood, 2001); and so on.

Of course, such projects of clarification presuppose that contributors being studied are reasonably internally consistent. But, not all are as internally consistent as they might hope to be. Indeed, it is conceivable that economists will sometimes profess worldviews that are at odds with those presupposed by their theorising. Here, though, is a yet further (or alternative) way in which social ontology of the sort in question can be useful: in revealing such inconsistencies (and possibly stimulating a dialectical process aimed at reconciling them).

Examples of this form of contribution already exist, of course. Thus, Mario Graça Moura (1997, 2002) focuses on the often-noted inconsistencies in Schumpeter's writings and shows that the explanation is that the ontological presuppositions of Schumpeter's equilibrium theorising are quite inconsistent with the worldview expressed in his vision of economic development. Stephen Pratten (1998) similarly shows that the inconsistencies between the ontological presuppositions of Marshall's equilibrium theorising and those of the theories of evolutionary biology explain Marshall's failure to achieve an intended second edition of his Principles incorporating insights from biology. Further, it is easy enough to subvert the claim of proponents of general equilibrium theorising that their project is essentially identical to Adam Smith's account of the invisible hand in his Wealth of Nations (see e.g., Kenneth Arrow and Frank Hahn, 1971, p. 1, for an example) by revealing the ontological presuppositions of the two to be quite opposed (see Leon Montes, 2003; Lawson, 2005a, 2005b, 2006).

But still these contributions, and others like them, are not enough. Research endeavour aimed at clarifying how certain contested contributions are best interpreted, or at identifying and explaining inconsistencies in an individual's output, are certainly of value. But it does not provide insight into the basic structure of social reality; it throws little if any light on the world beyond our conceptions. It would be preferable to engage in social scientific ontology that does. But is the latter possible?

Scientific ontology of this sort is indeed possible. But before indicating (and indeed in part in order to indicate) how it is possible, it is useful first to consider the feasibility of social philosophical ontology. For the latter proves helpful to the former. Of course, where the latter is possible, it could never be sufficient for social scientific ontology, not least because extra (fallible and contestable) empirical input will always be required. But, it can be enabling of it, not least by providing an account of the nature of social being with which all specific social existents conform. So at this point it is pertinent to turn to the question of the possibility of social philosophical ontology.

**In defence of social philosophical ontology**

It was earlier suggested that one fruitful approach to philosophical ontology is by way of (transcendental) arguments moving from premises concerning successful generalised human practices to conceptions of their conditions of possibility. Although it cannot be said that most social scientific theories are reliable, we can accept that all of us successfully engage in various practices found reliably to facilitate our achieving day-to-day goals connected to going-on in life. Our practices are successful in the sense that they allow us to negotiate our way round a complex reality, an outcome intelligible only on the assumption that our individual practices are mostly appropriate to their conditions.

For example a general feature of experience is that in any given community certain practices, for example driving on a particular side of the road, are repeated over again by seemingly all community participants.

How can this be explained? The obvious explanation is that individuals base their individual practices on a community-wide shared social structure of some sort. In particular within the Cambridge group it is argued that a necessary condition for the observed behaviour to be possible is the existence of communitywide *collective practices*, that is of *accepted* or acknowledged or recognised or observed ways of doing things (the term 'accepted' is utilised as a generic term – without implying there is necessarily approval), which guide the practices that individuals follow throughout a specific community (see e.g. Lawson 2003, chapter 2; 2012).

So a basic constituent of social reality is the collective practice. A collective practice is a way of proceeding that (implicitly) bears the status of being (collectively) accepted within a community. Various ways of proceeding might be imagined that could serve any outcome that (whether or not by design) happens to be facilitated through generalised conformity with a specific accepted way, i.e., with a specific collective practice; but for whatever reason, one way has turned out to be the way that is generally observed. Notice that there is always a range of behaviours consistent with any given collective practice.

**A conception of social philosophical ontology**

In this manner (of transcendental argument) further constituents of the social realm can be identified and elaborated. That is, by similarly seeking out other seemingly general and relatively incontestable features of human practices (e.g., that many repeated practices are followed by [not all, but] only a subset of members of a relevant community; that any given restricted set of repeated practices is oriented to other repeated practices; etc), and questioning their conditions of possibility, additional general (human-interaction-dependent) conditions of (further) human interaction can identified (see for example Lawson, 2003, chapter 2).

In this manner a conception of the nature of the social real can be built up. Rather than rehearse here the various arguments used in each case (for this again see Lawson, 2003, chapter 2), the following sketch includes only a brief description of the social philosophical ontology in this manner produced by, and currently entertained within, the Cambridge group (a more detailed recent account is found for example in Lawson, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

*Norms*

Collective practices, however they originate, can be, and very often are (in being so 'accepted'), functional in the sense of serving to co-ordinate social interaction, by indicating to all would-be (and/or permitted-to-be) participants within a specific community, how, amongst various conceivable ways of proceeding to a certain end, things are in fact done by other members of a community. In this way they facilitate relative stability, and thereby a degree of predictability. For this reason the idea of acceptance bound up with collective practices not only expresses the done thing (or things), but usually also carries connotations of normativity. Indeed, collective practices are often referred to just as *norms*.

Normativity arises because, or when, the noted indicative aspect of any collective practice is also interpreted as stipulative, as indicating how an individual *ought* to proceed. Collective practices, in order to facilitate coordination etc., need to persist, and this usually *requires* that relevant individuals conform to (various interacting sets of) them.

**Rights and obligations**

The normative aspect of collective practices thus gives rise to the notion of *obligation* along with the associated category of *right.* Obligations refer to accepted ways in which relevant community members are expected to proceed; rights express accepted ways of going on in which relevant individuals may proceed. We accept the obligation to adhere to a community's norms or collective practices, where appropriate, if we wish to participate within that community. Equally, when we are part of a community, we are permitted to enter into at least some of the community's collective practices and where this is so these can be seen as rights.

So social interaction is structurally organised, and is so through a generalised reliance upon collective practices involving rights and obligations. Notice that the role of rights and obligations in structuring social life presupposes the human capacities of being able to be both trustworthy and trusting of others, of being willing and able to make and keep to promises and other commitments, and to believe that others can and will also do so. It should be clear that these human capacities are necessary conditions for the interactions involved to occur, for obligations in particular to be efficacious. As such these capacities of trusting and being trustworthy, etc., qualify as much as anything for being categorised as the glue of social reality, as the adhesive that enables the organisational structure to achieve a degree of binding.

**Organisation in process**

Community life, then, is organised; it is so by way of emergent collective practices and their inherent rights and obligations that structure human interaction. The result is a social totality or set of totalities. And the latter have causal powers. A motorway system for example, structured by various inter-connecting collective practices, has powers of co-ordinating that are irreducible to any of its various motoring components; and a language system has powers to facilitate communication that are irreducible to those of any individual communicator.

Although providing structure collective practices are also inescapably processual in nature. The network of collective practices in place at any point is a condition of individual practices, and the sum total of individual practices, each a token of a collective practice, serves to reproduce and/or transform the total network of collective practices. So collective practices are both conditions and consequences of the individual practices they facilitate. They are reproduced and/or transformed through the individual practices or activities that they facilitate; they are inherently processual. The overall conception then is one of organisation-in-process; and any stability provided by a given (set of) collective practice(s) is always *relative* and *contingent*.

*Social rules*

Collective practices, as noted, possess normative aspects, and these are often linked to *social rules*. The latter are interpreted as expressions of the content of acceptances under their

purely indicative aspect, *understood as stipulations*. They are representations of norms, interpreted as *generalised procedures for action* (see Lawson 1997, 2003, 2012). As such they can always be (though they need not be, and are not always) expressed in a codified form along the lines of:

> *In C, if X then Y*

Here C is the relevant community or context, X is type of activity and Y is the content of a collective practice. For example, if on *the continent of Europe* (C) an individual wishes *to drive on public roads* (X), then he or she should (amongst other things) *keep to the right* (Y)[18].

Rules, of course, are not always *a posteriori* features of spontaneously evolving collective practices. They may equally be introduced in an *a priori* fashion via a decision or declaration by a relevant body or sub-grouping of the community, and designed either to facilitate new forms of collective practice or co-ordination, or to transform the manner in which forms of co-ordination have previously been achieved, and so forth.

But whether a rule emerges from unplanned interaction or via authoritative declaration it amounts to an expression or formulation of a normative aspect of a collective practice. Thus, according to the conception here sustained a rule is something that may be misinterpreted, broken, conformed to unwittingly, never codified, and so forth, and so is clearly ontologically distinct from any practices with which it is associated.

**Division of practice, process and events**

Within any community there is also a division of collective practice; certain practices can be followed by some but not by others. In order to follow particular practices membership of specific sub-groups within a community is often required.

In addition, practices that are accessible only to some community members are always oriented to, and indeed are constituted in relation to (that is, are *internally-related* to) different practices accessible only to specific sets of others. Thus the collective practices followed by students are constituted in relation to those followed by teachers; those followed by employers, landlord/ladies, seminar presenters, sellers, etc., are constituted in relation to those followed, respectively, by employees, tenants, seminar participants, buyers; and so on. All collective practices then cohere and interrelate with others, and are constitutively interdependent.

Any internally related combination of practices can be termed a *collective process*. Examples include the numerous interactions on a university campus, in a market place, or within the governing system of a country. Distinguishable episodes supported by collective processes we might identify as *collective events*. Examples of the latter include particular lectures or seminars, concerts, weddings, funerals and games of football.

The framework of acceptances remains fundamental. In any community there are accepted ways of proceeding for each group, oriented to the collective practices of other groups.

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[18] Needless to say, the category of social rule is also highly contested, not least within the Cambridge Group itself. For a useful discussions and overviews by members of the Cambridge Group see for example Ismael Al-Amoudi, 2010; John Latsis, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2013; Nuno Martins, 2009.

Similarly, there are usually accepted ways of allocating individuals to any particular group, processes of allocation that are themselves each a form of collective practice. Thus the appointment of a particular individual as a university professor, say in the UK, will proceed according to university and nationally accepted ways of making such appointments, and so on.

**Positions**

A category bound up with these different groupings is that of *social position*. A position, or rather position occupancy, is an accepted status that confers a social identity; to be allocated to a specific position is to acquire the social identity of being so positioned. Thus, an individual allocated to the position university professor, acquires the social/positional identity of (is accepted within the community as possessing the status of) university professor; and so on.

Rights and obligations are now clearly seen to be associated with positions and thereby group membership. If some positional practices *may* be participated in by a specific set of appropriately positioned individuals, being the content of positioned *rights*, a subset of those same practices *should* be undertaken by these positioned individuals, being the subject of positioned *obligations*.

Thus in the contemporary UK, an individual positioned as a university professor may have the right to borrow books from several libraries, to work in an office at all hours, to attend seminars in other departments. These rights are not available to all members of the wider UK community. But the individual is typically not only allowed, but additionally required, to give lectures and set and mark examinations, etc; these are included amongst the employment obligations of the position.

Wherever positioned rights are to be found there are always *accompanying* and *matching* obligations. Focussing on a given position, any rights from which the occupier benefits are always *accompanied* by obligations. Indeed, a position is essentially a locus of a set of specific rights and obligations, where the accepted position occupants are agents or bearers of these rights and obligations and typically possess a status or identity associated with them.

But any given position is always constituted in relation to others. And the rights of individuals in one group over individuals in another are *matched* by obligations of the latter group members with respect to the former. If university teachers have the rights to set exams, students have the obligation to sit them, just as students have the right to expect the exams to be marked, and fairly, and teachers have an obligation to undertake this. Even the rights of university teachers to use offices, and libraries etc, are matched to obligations of other positioned individuals or groups to ensure there are processes in place serving to fund, facilitate and maintain university offices, libraries, lecture halls, and so forth.

The internal relationality of sets of collective practices that was observed earlier can thus be seen to be bound up with mutually constituted sets of positions and positional rights and obligations.

**Social power and social relations**

If positional rights and obligations ultimately relate to ways in which certain positioned individuals can influence the behaviours of others, it follows that rights and obligations are in effect positional *powers*, respectively positive and negative powers. For the agents of rights (positive powers) have the causal capacity intentionally to get others, the subjects of those rights (those with relevant obligations, or negative powers) *to do something whether the latter want to do that something or not*. Obligations give reasons for action, and power exists so long as the 'subjects' in question are willing (and able) to fulfil their obligations.

So modern social reality fundamentally comprises a multitude of interrelating multi-component collective practices, processes and events bound up with an emergent structure of positional powers, comprising rights and obligations, in process.

**Social relations**

If human individuals are organised through being positioned as components of a system, and if the various positions are interrelated by way of connecting rights and obligations, then it is the latter powers that most qualify as the content of the category *social relation*. In other words a *social relation* just is (or is first and foremost) an accepted set of (matching) rights and obligations holding between, and connecting, two or more positions or occupants of positions. Social interaction can be understood as the contingent actualisations of such social relations. And because rights and obligations are forms of power, there is a sense in which all social relations are power relations.

In all this, if to repeat, the glue that renders these social relations as binding as they are is the human capacity both to be trustworthy and to trust, to enter into and to keep to commitments and to accept that others are able and willing to do so as well.

**Artefacts and other non-human social objects.**

Parenthetically, inanimate objects can also, in effect, acquire social identities through being positioned within a social system. Various objects when suitably positioned take on the identity of cash, passports or identity cards, deeds of ownership, wedding rings, and so forth. And once more this all depends on community acceptance. Of course, when inanimate objects are so socially positioned, the capacities or powers most closely associated with their positioning take the form *not* of rights and obligations but of system functions (see Lawson, 2009, 2012, and especially 2014a).

In effect this was noted from the outset in this overview of social philosophical ontology with the category of collective practice. The latter is essentially a status attached to, or position into which is allocated, certain sets of repeated or routinised practices.

**The Nature of Social Kinds**

Clearly categories of both social and non-social objects involve human construction or determination. Thus if we want to refer to objects that are allocated to these sorts of categories as respectively social and non-social natural kinds, any distinction to be drawn between them is not a matter of category determination. A significant difference however is

that once categories are determined, then in the social realm, but not the non-social natural realm, the membership of specific kinds is also often down to human determination.

For example, once a specific community has decided that water is that stuff that is made up of $H_2O$ molecules it is in a sense nature that decides which of the phenomena around qualify as water. However, once a community (or its representatives) have decided the nature of say a university professor or perhaps a passport or form of money (namely anything appropriately positioned within a community), a relevant body of that community can also decide who or what is to be appropriately positioned as a professor or a passport or a given form of money in that community.

**Community**

The discussion up until this point has taken the idea of a community as a given. However the conception of the community defended is *not* foundational (there clearly are no social foundations) but of an equally emergent and contingent component of a human-practice dependent social reality in process.

It has been emphasised throughout that collective practices, positions, rights and obligations are effectively properties of communities. Indeed the collective practices, positions, rights and obligations organise a certain group of individuals as members of, or participants in, a community. So a community is an emergent social totality or system. To the extent that there is a set of rights that apply to all community members, and given that all rights and obligations are attached to a position, it follows that community membership itself means occupancy of a specific social position. A community is precisely a structured totality whose individual components comprise the occupants of a certain specific social position.

Clearly, given that (positioned) rights and obligations structure all (positioned) collective practices, there is a sense in which each community must be seen to be a *moral community*. The nature of the community is elaborated at some length in Lawson 2012.

In short, social reality is found to be comprised of a multitude of interrelating multi-component collective practices, processes and events that simultaneously both ground and presuppose a complex system of positions, positioned rights and obligations, that is, social relations, which are always in process, and serve, amongst other things, to organise individuals as social systems of community participants. The conception supported is clearly one of complex organisation or systems in process.

**Social emergence**

The conception of social reality elaborated, turning on the category of collective practice, is thus one of an emergent form of system or organisation; indeed, it is a system of systems, with each involving a relational organisation of component individuals that facilitates forms of co-ordinated interaction, (relative) stability and predictability that would be unavailable to each individual in the absence of any such organisation.

Certain powers of co-ordinated interactions are available to individuals *qua* community members, constituting affordances, involving rights and obligations, that would not have emerged if human individuals were instead mere-biological beings that just happened to be situated in close time-space proximity to others but without much, if any, sense of group

collective practices. So we have a form of organisation (of human interactions) that is ontologically irreducible, involving powers or affordances that are thereby causally irreducible.

It is just because such collective practices, including associated positions, rights and obligations etc., as emergent forms of organising structure, are efficacious in facilitating co-ordinated interaction that *their reality is established*.  And it is because they are irreducible to the individuals and individual practices which they organise that *their relative autonomy is grounded*, as is that of an appropriately oriented social science.

The category *social structure* is used to cover all the various features so far discussed that result from, and serve to relationally organise, human beings and individual activities, without being reducible to those individuals and their individual actions. Social structure, interpreted in this way, is not something additional to the phenomena so far discussed, nor is it a stuff of which they are composed.  Rather, it is a general category that collects together the collective practices, acceptances, positions, rules, rights, obligations and such like that are emergent features of human actions and interactions. So the conception arrived at is one of emergent social structural organisation in process.

Just like social systems or communities as totalities, social structure is (synchronically) emergent in the sense of being dependent upon, but distinct from, and ontologically and causally irreducible to, the individual activities which these structures serve in turn to facilitate and coordinate.

**Process once more**

Social structure, so conceived, is clearly continually undergoing transformation, whether intended or unintended, understood or hardly recognised. Some transformation is clearly by design. But at least as significantly, position occupants regularly transform their positional rights and obligations, and indeed all forms of social structure, not intentionally, but merely as a by-product of merely carrying on in life.

All aspects of social structure depend on us, and so their continuing existence depends on their being reproduced through our individual practices in total.  However, we often change how we behave, whether in response to changes in context, knowledge, technology, or merely due to accidents. When we come to act, the contents of previous acceptances, whether embedded in agreements, precedents, or whatever, are given to us; and through our acting we both draw on them (whether or not we are explicitly aware of this), and also (if typically unintentionally) contribute not just to the reproduction of social structures but also to their transformation. Even where reproduction of aspects is the outcome, this is a contingent achievement, warranting as much explanation as change. Social reality is everywhere intrinsically dynamic in nature.

The human individual is also subject to continuous transformation. The ever-changing structural context facing the individual makes a difference not just through constraining and facilitating certain causal powers; it also affects the very nature of human individuals. Human beings develop psychological tendencies and social capabilities in a manner clearly influenced by their socio-cultural and geo-historical contexts, and as a result of experiences through life. Human beings, like social systems, are organisations in process; and the two are

linked through processes of co-development as both human individuals and social structure are continuously reproduced and transformed through the sum total of individual practices.

It can be noted, finally, that this account is thoroughly naturalistic, in the sense of being consistent with our best accounts of natural science, and with social phenomena recognised as both emergent and dependent upon non-social phenomena. All the components of social structure are either 1) accepted or actual structural patterns or structural features of accepted forms of human practice or 2) ideational, constituting various representations of the former along with interpretations of various aspects or properties as norms or rules, including positions, rights and obligations, along with the content of other previous and ongoing acceptances, including the outcomes of decision making processes, or the content of official declarations, all bearing on matters such as collective practices or the distribution of rights of access to community positions (and so to accompanying positional rights and obligations) etc., or 3) both.

**Consequences**

The conception briefly sketched clearly has numerous implications for many matters including approaches to substantive theorising and ethics.  For example, it obviously provides *directionality* to social theorising. In particular, it is suggestive of the sorts of scenarios for which researchers ought to be methodologically prepared. Because the social world is found to be structured (it is irreducible to, say, events and practices) it follows that social research will need to concern itself not only with correlating, or otherwise describing, surface actualities, but also, and seemingly primarily, with identifying the latter's underlying conditions. Indeed it appears to follow that social-scientific research has, as a proper and compelling object, the explaining of surface phenomena in terms of its underlying conditions.

Alternatively expressed, the ontological conception defended encourages a consideration of how in social theorising, including economics, causal explanatory projects might best be conducted[19].

For matters of ethics and projects of a practical or policy sort, it is relevant to recall that all human beings are found to be both shaped by the evolving relations (to others) in which they stand, as well as differently (or uniquely) positioned.  If generalised flourishing is accepted as the goal of ethics, as the general good (see Lawson, 2014b), it follows that all actions, because they are potentially other-affecting, bear a moral aspect. And any policy programmes formulated without attention to differences, that presume homogeneity within human populations, are likely to be question begging from the outset.  Certainly, programmes of action that ignore their likely impact on the wider community are immediately seen as potentially deficient (again see Lawson 2014b).

Eventually, of course, such considerations point to questions of power, democracy and legitimacy.  They raise questions of who should be taking decisions in a world of different identities where most of us are likely in some way (differentially) affected by actions taken by others. And indeed they invite a questioning of whether anything less than the whole of

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[19] This emphasis, in turn, points to a need to develop modes of inference over and above (the usual forms of) deductive and inductive logic. To pursue causal explanation as interpreted here, we require a mode of inference that takes us behind the surface phenomenon to its causes, or more generally from phenomena lying at one level to causes often lying at a different deeper one.  This is *retroduction*. The specifics of the explanatory context will bear upon how in practice the retroductive process might proceed. But it seems likely that it will often be helped along by a logic of analogy and/or metaphor, and rest usually upon ingenuity as well as luck.

humanity (and possibly much more) can constitute a relevant unit of analysis and focus in the shaping of emancipatory projects and actions.

If the foregoing indicates something of the nature of the conception of social philosophical ontology currently maintained, a remaining task to undertake here is to justify the contention that, with regard to social phenomena in particular, insights gained via philosophical ontology can aid the project of scientific ontology, that the results of philosophical ontology applied to social phenomena can facilitate the elaboration of social entities. It is this issue that is considered next.

**Social scientific ontology, some suggested criteria**

The objective here is merely to sketch some (non-sufficient) criteria that phenomena investigated in social scientific ontology might reasonably be expected to satisfy. Four are usefully elaborated.

There can, to repeat, be no direct inference from the results of philosophical ontology to the sorts of existents or categories investigated in scientific ontology. To reach the latter, additional empirical input is always required.  However, in the case of social ontology at least, philosophical ontological findings can be said to be helpful to the task before us, and, in the circumstances that currently prevail, are possibly essential to it.

Amongst the results of the exercise in philosophical ontology described above are the insights that social reality is an emergent, open-ended, structured, transformational process in motion, in which the parts are constituted in and through their (changing) relations to each other. It follows that social entities of interest to, say, economists, such as money, markets, institutions, firms, social and individual identities etc., ought to cohere with this conception. This, then, is a *first* criterion for any sustainable conception of a particular social entity.

If formulations of specific social entities, say, of an institution, money, technology, or a firm, can indeed be made to cohere in a satisfactory way with the above elaborated results of social philosophical ontology, there are likely to be various ways of achieving this in each case. On what basis, then, might a specific formulation be reasonably adopted?

Needless to say, the (realist) orientation adopted here accepts as an objective that the social category employed also picks out a definite feature of reality, that there is a definite referent. This is a *second* suggested criterion for any sustainable conception of a particular social feature.

Notice, that from the philosophical-ontological picture elaborated, all social phenomena are part of an emergent totality. An obvious question to ask of any conception of any particular social phenomenon is what distinguishes it from anything/everything else? In virtue of what can it be identified?  For if everything is constituted through its relations to everything else how do we draw boundaries? Are there, for example, many markets or just one? And can we really distinguish, say, markets from money, or economy from society? Certainly we cannot use the tools of controlled experiment to insulate a particular social form from any other.

Furthermore, if change is fundamental to all social phenomena, in what sense can anything be identified as the same phenomenon over time? Are the phenomena we call money,

Cambridge University, capitalism or the market place the same phenomena that were ascribed the same labels two centuries ago, or even two decades or two days ago?

These are questions less obviously, or perhaps less frequently, pertinent to the theorising of non-social phenomena, where there is perhaps reason to suppose that what we call hydrogen, quarks, tanon-neutrinos and water are the same (sorts of) things (or stuff) today as they always were, and wherever they are located. But in social theory the need to be addressing such questions as these seems to be everywhere unavoidable.

A seemingly important *third* criterion for a formulation of a category to be accepted is that it be consistent in a sense with historical usage. It would be unhelpful to interpret a term in a way that carries connotations that bear no relation to the manner in which the category has previously been understood. But still, how precisely is a specific interpretation to be determined?

An essential part of the answer, albeit one that will always seem unsatisfactory to some, is that it will depend on the context of analysis. We can see that at some level the conceptions resulting from mainstream formalistic-deductivist modelling will be forced into the separable and separated intrinsically constant mechanisms (or 'social atoms'), so that the formulation of categories in this literature must be treated with due caution. But there are other literatures as well as everyday lay understandings. It may even be that (many of) these are widely found to be realistic but perhaps dismissed on erroneous grounds, perhaps for not being sufficiently formalistic.

For example, some notion of an institution is widely adopted; even a dictionary definition can provide an input to a sustainable conception. Further, before the rise of the mathematical mainstream, the largest tradition in North American economics was that of institutionalism. For this project a conception of an institution was a central category, and indeed remains so. It is not being suggested that all such conceptions of an institution will be identical or perfectly coherent. Nor is there a unique way of proceeding. But a task of synthesising conceptions found in this literature can perhaps be usefully undertaken, employing the criterion that the resulting outcome defended be consistent with the earlier defended (philosophically derived) emergentist ontology. This synthesising process will typically be dialectical (preserving the insights of all conceptions dialectically developed). In any case, an initial conception might be continually revised to fit with relevant considerations. Put differently, the process might usefully involve what Strawson calls revisionary metaphysics in addition to the initial descriptive metaphysics. Unlike Strawson's conception though, the goal here are categories that express aspects of the basic structure of social reality.

If 'revisionary metaphysics' is indeed involved a likely relevant *fourth* criterion to employ is that any conception defended has some theoretical or practical utility. It seems pointless transforming the meaning of a term in order to express something that, say, is already captured by a further category, or carries no analytical insight.

To repeat, there is no presumption here that these four criteria will be sufficient, or will always lead everyone to the same conclusion. But they do seem necessary to the process of elaborating sustainable social categories. The manner of discriminating amongst an array of competing conceptions consistent with the noted criteria will clearly depend on context specific issues and considerations, though it may sometimes be a relatively simple matter to do so.

It is essentially through being guided by these criteria (augmented by context specific alternatives) that members of the Cambridge group have elaborated the various social-scientific categories. These include conceptions of technology (Faulkner and Runde, 2009; Clive Lawson, 2012); gender (Lawson, 2007); money (Ingham, 1996, 2004; Lawson, 2012), the corporation (Deakin, 2012; Lawson, 2012), the institution (Lawson, 2014c), amongst various others including even a coherent conception of neoclassical economics (see Lawson, 2013c). It is probably fair to say, however, that it is scientific ontology of this sort (though in the process of being developed, and figuring continuously in the weekly workshops of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group) that constitutes the area of the group's thinking that has appeared less in published form.

It might usefully be re-emphasised, finally, that there is no suggestion here that the sort of approach just outlined constitutes the only possibility for ontological elaboration at the level of social entities. It all depends on context.

For example, where, or if, a social theory is, with reason, accepted as reliable, there is a case for scientific ontological elaboration along the lines suggested by Quine. Many accept the social theories of Marx as realistic, and much time has been spent elaborating Marx's categories of socially necessary labour time, exploitation, exchange and use value, and so forth. But in modern economics, a widespread acceptance of any set of theories as even plausible remains a rarity, and is seemingly always contentious.

A further strategy is to borrow categories or theories or metaphors from domains other than the social, to render them consistent with the ontological conception defended here, and then enquire into their usefulness as a social category. In such endeavour, the analysis is necessarily modal rather than injunctive, that is, it involves investigating the relevance of the borrowed features rather than taking them as given.

An example is the borrowing of (Darwinian) evolutionary conceptions from biology. Obviously, in the light of the social ontology set out above, this evolutionary conception, which is already of an intrinsically dynamic mechanism, needs first to be rendered consistent with the account of human-practice dependent social transformation, before, or as part of addressing, the question is put as to whether this evolutionary conception carries social theoretic relevance. The latter issue of course is an empirical one (for a lengthy analysis see Lawson, 2003, chapter 5 and Chapter 10; also see Nuno Martins, 2011); and so on.

**Final comments**

The aim of this 'position paper' is to set out the rationale for, briefly to describe, and in part defend, an ongoing collective programme/project in social ontology.

The features that differentiate the project described from most others in ontology are that a) its primary concern is with the social domain and b) its ontological orientation has thus far been first and foremost philosophical rather than scientific.

However, in contradistinction to many prominent conceptions of the essential nature of philosophical ontology, the approach adopted here is neither dogmatic nor transcendent but conditional and immanent; indeed it is as situated, fallible and practically conditioned as the more substantive contributions upon which it draws, and/or for which it seeks to underlabour.

It does not analyse a world apart from that investigated by science and/or experienced in some form in (and navigated though) everyday social practices; rather it addresses that same reality but with different questions, emphases and tools.

To this point in time the project in question has provided, before all else, a conception of the basic structure of social reality, a set of insights into the nature of social being; it has primarily concerned itself with social-philosophical ontology. Less attention has been paid to elaborating basic social categories or entities, the task many allocate to social scientific ontology. For reasons laid out above, insights into these categories may actually be best achieved by way of (dialectically) combining philosophical ontology and socio-substantive accounts (including lay interpretations) in a programme of revisionary metaphysics. The fulfilment of the latter, though, lies mostly in the future. This paper has been concerned at least to provide any such programme with a rationale, and also to set out some grounds for supposing that a successful realisation of its objectives are entirely feasible.

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