

Etic Theorizing Unanchored

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Abstract: Etic theorizing uses the theorist's social notions to theorize about their subject. This theorist may claim that Genghis Khan was a war criminal even though his actions predate the enactment of the Geneva Conventions. Brian Epstein considers a modal etic theorist who claims that Genghis Khan would have been a war criminal even if the Geneva Conventions were never enacted. Epstein argues that this has metaphysical import: it requires postulating a novel metaphysical notion of "anchoring." Drawing from some familiar issues in modal actualism, I argue that modal etic theorizing does not support this postulate. But it does suggest a distinctive kind of modality at work in social reality.

Keywords: grounding, anchoring, social modality

1. FROM SOCIAL THEORIZING TO METAPHYSICS

Contrast two forms of social theorizing. *Etic* theorizing uses the social notions of the theorist. *Emic* theorizing uses the social notions of their subject. Focus on etic theorizing. A familiar problem is that the theorist's social notions may be unavailable to their subject. So, are the theorist's notions irrelevant? Is imposing irrelevant notions onto their subject problematic? These questions challenge the political and ethical import of etic theorizing.

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Whatever this political and ethical import may be, etic theorizing may seem not to have any distinctively *metaphysical* import. But, surprisingly, Epstein (2015) says it does. He argues that etic theorizing can extend beyond actual societies to *possible, counterfactual* societies. This is *modal* etic theorizing. Epstein argues that it requires postulating a novel metaphysical notion: *anchoring*.¹

The literature contains criticisms of Epstein's arguments (Hawley, 2019; Mikkola, 2019; Schaffer, 2019; Pagano, 2023) as well as his replies (Epstein, 2019a,b). But I will approach matters from another angle. First, I present the alleged *etic data* that etic theorizing is meant to accommodate (§2). Then I present the *etic case for anchoring* (§3). One of its key premises is this conditional: if the etic data obtain, then anchoring is required. I argue against this by showing that anchoring is *not* required even assuming that the etic data obtain (§4). The argument uses a striking analogy between etic theorizing and some issues familiar from modal metaphysics. It also suggests a distinctive kind of modality at work in social reality. I conclude with a brief discussion of it (§5).

2. THE ETIC DATA

Etic theorizing assumes that, at least in some cases, the social rules set up in actuality can apply to counterfactual scenarios in which they were never set up. Let us consider one of these alleged cases.

In 1221, Genghis Khan ordered the slaughter of Nishapur. Later in 1949, rules for war criminality were set up in countries that ratified the Geneva Conventions. Those rules, we may suppose, apply to Genghis Khan: if he ordered the slaughter of Nishapur, then he is a war criminal because he gave that order. He did give the order. His doing so *grounds* his being a war criminal. Of course, no one before 1949 could have said so meaning what *we* mean in saying it now. But *we* can say so. And, if we do, what we say is true.

That's actual history. Consider a counterfactual history in which Genghis Khan still gave the order but the rules for war criminality were never set up. Would Genghis Khan still be a war criminal?

The etic theorist answers, "Yes." It is arguable whether this answer is true. But our concern here is only with what follows *if* it is true. So, for now, we may just assume that it is.

The etic theorist's answer presupposes that some social notions, like war criminality, may be used as "universal tools" for theorizing about actual and counterfactual social scenarios alike (Epstein, 2015, 2019a). For a social notion

¹ My focus will just be on modal etic theorizing. So, I drop the "modal" qualifier.

to be such a universal tool, it must actually be set up:

Set Up. The enactment of the Geneva Conventions sets up that to be a war criminal is to satisfy the actual conditions stated in the Geneva Conventions.

The term “sets up” is an informal placeholder. Our focus will be on how to refine it. Specifically, Epstein claims that it cannot be read as *grounds* but must, instead, be read as his postulated notion of *anchors*. But before pursuing this, let us finish unpacking the etic theorist’s notion of a universal tool. Its universality requires its noncontingent applicability:

Universality. Necessarily, if the rules for war criminality apply, and if Genghis Khan gave the order, then he is a war criminal because he gave that order.

What’s most distinctive about the etic theorist’s answer is that it allows the rules for war criminality to apply even in a counterfactual scenario in which they were never set up. That requires the truth of the counterfactual conditional:

Counterfactual. Were the Geneva Conventions never enacted, the rules for war criminality apply, and Genghis Khan ordered the slaughter of Nishapur, then Genghis Khan would be a war criminal because he gave the order.

And this will be true only if the counterfactual scenario is possible:

Possibility. It is possible that the Geneva Conventions are never enacted, the rules for war criminality apply, Genghis Khan ordered the slaughter of Nishapur, and Genghis Khan is a war criminal because he gave the order.

These propositions are the *etic data*.² Etic theorizing is possible only if it accommodates this data. To keep track of it, here is a legend:

G. Khan ordered the slaughter of Nishapur.

S. Khan is a war criminal.

² The etic data can also be formulated in terms of *facts* or *sentences*. But nothing much hangs on which, or on sliding between them when stylistically convenient.

A. The Geneva Conventions are enacted.

R. To be a war criminal is to satisfy the actual conditions stated in the Geneva Conventions.

And here is the etic data rendered with that legend:

Set Up. A sets up R

Universality. $\Box(R \rightarrow (G \rightarrow G \prec S))$

Counterfactual. $(\neg A \wedge R \wedge G) \Box \rightarrow G \prec S$

Possibility. $\diamond(\neg A \wedge R \wedge G \prec S)$

The data uses *partial* (“ \prec ”) as opposed to *full* (“ $<$ ”) ground. The weaker (\prec) versions are preferable. They follow from the stronger ($<$) versions, given the consensus that a full ground is a partial ground. And they make the data acceptable to those who deny $G < S$ (such as Schaffer’s (2019) relationalist who accepts R , $G < S$ and so $G \prec S$).

More could be said about each of the four propositions capturing the etic data. But these details may be postponed. Our focus is just on assessing whether the etic data requires anchoring. And assessing that will not turn on the nuances of how the etic data is understood.

3. THE ETIC CASE FOR ANCHORING

Epstein’s *etic case for anchoring* may be represented as this argument:

- (1) If the etic data obtains, then anchoring must be postulated.
- (2) The etic data obtains.
- (3) So, Anchoring must be postulated.

Those skeptical of etic theorizing may challenge the second premise. But here our concern is only with its metaphysical *consequences*. Specifically, does the etic data require postulating anchoring? To answer this, we may just *assume* the second premise to consider what follows from it. So, our focus will just be on the first premise.

Epstein’s justification for the first premise has two parts. The negative part argues that the etic data cannot be accommodated by reading “sets up” as *grounds*. The positive part is that the only way to accommodate the etic data is by reading “sets up” as *anchors*.

Ground is now a familiar, if not uncontroversial, notion Raven (2020b). By contrast, anchoring is an unfamiliar postulate. It is meant to be like ground. Both are meant to be, or to back, metaphysical determination or explanation, of some sort. But they are also meant to differ. Ground is “world-bound”: if some facts ground another, then they all obtain in the same possible world. And this is supposed to prevent ground from “exporting across possibilities”: facts in one possible world cannot ground a fact in some other possible world. By contrast, anchoring is *not* world-bound and so *may* export across possibilities: some facts that obtain in one possible world may anchor a fact that obtains in some other possible world. The literature contains some attempts to make these notions more precise (Schaffer, 2019; Epstein, 2019a). But as they are, they are clear enough to present the core idea of the etic case.

The etic data allows the rules for war criminality to apply to counterfactual scenarios in which they are never set up. But, it is alleged, ground is world-bound and so cannot export across possibilities. That poses an obstacle to reading “sets up” as ground. This the negative part. Anchoring is postulated to be a ground-like notion tailor-made to overcome this obstacle. Anchoring is *not* world-bound and *does* export across possibilities. So, it is the only available notion able to accommodate the etic data. This is the positive part. Both parts combine as Epstein’s justification for the second premise. And, given our assumption of the first premise, that completes the etic case for anchoring.

4. MODALITY MATTERS

There has been some critical discussion of how exactly to interpret the etic case (Epstein, 2015, 2019a,b; Hawley, 2019; Mikkola, 2019; Schaffer, 2019; Pagano, 2023). These discussions include detailed investigations into the notions of world-boundedness, exportation, the ground/anchor distinction, and the notions of social kinds, social facts, and social construction. These details are worth pursuing. But I will mostly abstract away from them. My focus will be on another approach. If it is on track, it predicts the outcome of those investigations whatever the details may be: the etic case is unsound.

The key idea behind the approach is to interpret the etic data in modal *as opposed to* worldly terms. Since Kripke’s pioneering work, it is standard to interpret modal operators like “ \diamond ” and “ \square ” as quantifiers over possible worlds. Lewis’s (1986) ingenious applications of modal realism normalized formulating

many metaphysical (and other) issues in terms of worlds.³ This shaped a climate in which one could seamlessly (and, often, silently) slide between talk of modal operators and talk of worlds. I do not wish to challenge the fruitfulness of world-talk to semantics. But Kripke (1972) himself long ago warned of its potential to distort metaphysics. I suspect that whatever force the etic case has depends on such a distortion. I will argue for this by presenting a modal interpretation of the etic data that is compatible with reading “sets up” as *grounds*. This is a direct argument against the negative part of the etic case. It is also an indirect argument against the positive part. If “sets up” can be read as *grounds*, then that opens another path toward accommodating the etic data. But then reading “sets up” as *anchors* is *not* the *only* way to accommodate the etic data. And so the first premise of the etic case for anchoring is false.

The interpretation uses an insight from modal actualism (Fine, 2005). It is to treat whatever is within the scope of a modal operator as actual. Just as quantifiers in the scope of a modal operator range over *actual* objects, so too propositions in the scope of a modal operator are *actual*. Thus, “ $\diamond\phi$ ” says that it could be that (*actually*) ϕ . So, to say that possibly it rains is to say that it could be that (*actually*) it rains. This does not imply that it actually rains. It just says what is *possibly* actual: that, *possibly*, it actually rains.

This bears on the etic case for anchoring. The alleged obstacle to reading “sets up” as ground is that actual facts would have to ground nonactual facts, which ground’s world-boundedness precludes. To test whether the obstacle is real, let us see whether reading “sets up” as ground *does* require any actual facts to ground any nonactual facts. Start with:

Set Up*. $A < R$

This contains no modal operators. It can only be read as stating that an *actual* fact A *actually* grounds an *actual* fact R. And so the ground claim is world-bound.

There is a neighboring ground claim to consider:

Set Up**. $A < \square R$

The difference between **Set Up*** and **Set Up**** is subtle. It is an instance of a general distinction between a fact’s *having the status* of being necessary and a fact *reporting* its status as necessary (Raven, 2020a). For example, “2 is prime”

³ Lewis’s ambition to *reduce* modality to nonmodal notions requires that his own world-talk must ultimately be construed as nonmodal.

has the status of being necessarily true (if true). But it does not report this status. By contrast, “ $\Box(2 \text{ is prime})$ ” not only has the status of being necessarily true (if true), but also reports this status. Because both “2 is prime” and “ $\Box(2 \text{ is prime})$ ” are necessarily true (if true), both are necessarily equivalent. But there are still reasons to distinguish between them. We may, for instance, wish to say that one *explains* the other, which requires them being distinct. In any case, **Set Up*** does *not* entail **Set Up****, although it is compatible with it. Having distinguished the two, we may wonder whether we should have focused on the latter. Does the ratification of the Geneva Conventions set up rules of war criminality that have the *status* of being necessary, or does it set up the *necessity* of those rules? That is, what exactly does A set up: R or $\Box R$?

The literature tends to be equivocal on this.⁴ Nor is it clear what to say. On the one hand, as sophisticated as the writers of the Geneva Conventions were, it is doubtful that they consciously intended not only to set up the rules but also their *necessity*. On the other hand, we are assuming that the rules may be used for etic theorizing and this requires their necessity. The issue calls for further discussion.

For now, we just ask whether **Set Up**** conflicts with ground’s alleged world-boundedness. The answer is that it does not. While “ $\Box R$ ” puts “R” in the scope of the modal operator “ \Box ”, “ $\Box R$ ” itself is *not* in the scope of any modal operator. “ $\Box R$ ” is expressing an *actual* fact (which is a necessity). So, **Set Up**** states that an *actual* fact A *actually* grounds an *actual* necessity $\Box R$. And so even **Set Up**** is *not* a case of an *actual* fact grounding a *nonactual* fact.

What about the rest of the etic data? They are:

Universality. $\Box(R \rightarrow (G \rightarrow G \prec S))$

Counterfactual. $(\neg A \wedge R \wedge G) \Box \rightarrow G \prec S$

Possibility. $\diamond(\neg A \wedge R \wedge G \prec S)$

Their syntax shows that *none* requires grounding across actual and nonactual possibilities. None embed a modal operator within the scope of a ground operator. Indeed, it is the converse: the ground operators occur only within the scope of a modal operator.

⁴ Epstein himself is somewhat equivocal. He sometimes speaks of the anchoring of *frame principles* which are restricted necessities (Epstein, 2015, 2019b). Elsewhere he makes no explicit mention of *necessities* (Epstein, 2019a).

The preceding points extend to possible elaborations of the etic data. On one elaboration, the rules for war criminality are *set up differently* than they actually are. They are grounded in something *other* (ϕ) than the ratification of the Geneva Conventions:^{5,6}

+Possibility. $\diamond(\neg A \wedge R \wedge G \prec S \wedge \exists\phi(\phi \prec R))$

On another elaboration, the rules for war criminality are never set up. They are ungrounded:

-Possibility. $\diamond(\neg A \wedge R \wedge G \prec S \wedge \neg\exists\phi(\phi \prec R))$

These elaborations show how it may not only be contingent that A sets up R, but also that R is set up at all. And this is partly what etic theorists have in mind when attempting to use actual social notions to theorize about counterfactual scenarios. But, as before, none of this requires ground to export across actual and nonactual possibilities. I conclude that there is no real obstacle to reading “sets up” as grounds.

Any appearances to the contrary likely derive from the distortions of world-talk. We may render the gist of the etic case in world-talk, roughly, like this:

If the enactment of the Geneva Conventions *in the actual world* sets up the rules for war criminality so that they apply *across nonactual worlds*, then it seems as if what happens *here in the actual world* must “hop” the worldly divide to apply to those *nonactual worlds*. But that raises the problem of accounting for this “world-hopping.” And that suggests postulating a novel metaphysical notion (anchoring) to account for it.

But this rendering is both dispensable and distorting. It is dispensable because we have just seen how to describe the etic data without world-talk. And it is distorting because world-talk casts a pseudo-problem as a problem, much like how Kripke (1972) claimed that world-talk casts the pseudo-problem of transworld identity as a problem.

5 Some actual truths have grounds that they might not have had. For example, my being a philosopher or a monarch is grounded only in the first disjunct, although it could have been grounded only in the second.

6 Those who wish to consider whether R is *zero-grounded* may reify the empty plurality of facts 0 and either take it to be in the range of the variable ϕ or take $0 \prec R$ to be a substitution instance of the open formula $\phi \prec R$.

Removing an obstacle to reading “sets up” as ground is not yet to explain just how rules actually set up can apply to counterfactual scenarios in which they are never set up. Delivering such an explanation is a substantial task for the etic theorist. But it is not our task. Ours was just to assess whether etic theorizing requires anchoring. Even so, we may sketch a “proof of concept” for how the explanation might go. Here too we may draw inspiration from modal actualism.

There is a familiar problem in modal metaphysics: the problem of possible nonbeing. Possibly, Socrates did not exist. This is true only if the singular proposition that Socrates does not exist is true of some counterfactual scenario. The scenario must be one in which Socrates does not exist. But without him, the proposition about him won’t exist either. And it cannot be true if it does not exist. How, then, can that proposition be true?

A natural answer at least congenial with (if not entailed by) modal actualism distinguishes two ways for a proposition to be true (Adams, 1981; Fine, 1985; Einheuser, 2012). A proposition may be true *in* a counterfactual scenario (“inner truth”) or true *at* a counterfactual scenario (“outer truth”). As Fine puts it:

According to the outer notion of truth, we can stand outside a world and compare the proposition with what goes on in the world in order to ascertain whether it is true. But according to the inner notion, we must first enter with the proposition into the world before ascertaining its truth. (Fine 1985, 163)

Fine’s picturesque remarks suggest how inner and outer truth differ. Inner truth requires that the proposition exists in the scenario it represents. Outer truth does not. As things actually are, Socrates exists (or at least existed). That makes him available to be a constituent of the proposition that he does not exist. By contrast, in a counterfactual scenario in which Socrates never existed, he is unavailable to be a constituent of any proposition. So, the proposition that Socrates does not exist won’t exist in that scenario. That limits what folks in that scenario can assert. *They* cannot assert what we assert when *we* say, “Socrates does not exist.” Nevertheless, the proposition that Socrates does not exist can be true *at* that scenario, even if it is not true *in* that scenario.⁷ Adapting remarks from Adams to our case:

⁷ This reverses Kripke’s (1972; 2013) infamous claim that, because there are no unicorns, *we* cannot describe a counterfactual scenario in which there are.

A world-story that includes no singular proposition about [Socrates] constitutes and describes a possible world in which [he] would not exist. It represents [Socrates's] possible non-existence, not by including the proposition that [Socrates does] not exist but simply by omitting [him]. (Adams 1981, 22)

More must be said about the distinction's viability and its application to the problem of possible nonbeing.⁸ But it is not my aim to assess its viability or to solve that problem. The distinction is intended to apply in general to any proposition. And so, if it is viable, it applies in particular to the propositions capturing the etic data. My aim is to consider this application of the distinction, assuming its viability.

The intended application is inspired by the case of Socrates's possible nonbeing. Just as we may distinguish between the inner or outer truth of the proposition that Socrates does not exist, so too with the propositions capturing the etic data. How would Genghis Khan be a war criminal were the rules for war criminality never set up? Just as Socrates's being "set up" (i.e. born) delivers him as a constituent of the proposition that he does not exist—even at scenarios in which he does not exist, so too the Geneva Convention's setting up rules for war criminality makes them applicable to individuals—even at scenarios in which the rules were never set up. In general, rules set up *in* actuality can hold *at* a counterfactual scenario *in* which they were never set up.

These ideas apply to the etic data. Suppose the ratification of the Geneva Conventions grounds the rules of war criminality ($A < R$). Counterfactual scenarios in which these grounds (A) are absent would prevent the rules of war criminality (R) from being set up *in* those scenarios. But this does not prevent those rules from applying *at* those scenarios. To illustrate, recall that counterfactual scenarios in which Socrates is absent may prevent the inner truth of the proposition that Socrates does not exist without preventing its outer truth. Just as the proposition that Socrates does not exist may be true *at* a scenario in which he is absent, so too the proposition stating the rules of war criminality (R) may be true *at* a scenario in which its actual grounds (A) are absent. Folks *in* such a scenario cannot assert what *we* assert when we say "Khan is a war criminal." That is a known consequence of etic theorizing. Whether its political or ethical import is acceptable warrants further investigation. But the investigation so far has not delivered the advertised *metaphysical* import of etic theorizing.

⁸ See Einheuser (2012) for a recent development.

5. SOCIAL MODALITY

Etic theorizing does, however, have metaphysical import of another unadvertised sort. I conclude with a suggestion of what it is. The discussion will be brief and rather speculative. It is not meant to give the last word but, instead, to point toward future work.

Epstein (2015, 2019a) describes etic theorizing as using social notions as “universal tools.” These may include the rules for war criminality (R). If R is to be a universal tool, then it must be, at least in *some* sense, necessary. Were it not, it would be *false* in the counterfactual scenarios where it was meant to apply. Earlier I drew attention to a subtle ambiguity in how R’s being a universal tool requires its necessity. Does the ratification of the Geneva Conventions set up rules of war criminality (R) that have the *status* of being necessary, or does it set up the *necessity* of those rules ($\Box R$)? And, as mentioned above, the question calls for further discussion. Here I wish to make a provisional suggestion.

Consider Fine’s influential *nonmodal* conception of essence (Fine, 1994; Correia, 2024). It allows for nonmodal facts to have modal *consequences*. Consider the fact that singleton Socrates essentially contains Socrates. According to Fine, that is a *nonmodal* fact about the essence of singleton Socrates. But this does not prevent it from having modal *consequences*. Fine holds that whenever an item is essentially thus-and-so, then it is necessarily thus-and-so. Indeed, he even suggests that its being essentially thus-and-so helps *explain* its being necessarily thus-and-so. If so, it follows that the nonmodal, essentialist fact explains the modal fact that singleton Socrates necessarily contains Socrates. My suggestion is that something analogous may hold in our case. Perhaps A explains $\Box R$ even if A only sets up nonmodal R.

Revisiting our question, what does A set up: R or $\Box R$? If A sets up $\Box R$, then there is at least some sense in which A directly explains $\Box R$. But even if A merely sets up R, it may still at least indirectly explain $\Box R$. Either way, we have a contingent fact A explaining a necessary fact $\Box R$. That already raises hard questions. How, in general can *any* contingent fact explain a necessary fact?⁹ And how, in particular, can the *contingencies* of the Geneva’s Conventions ratification explain the *necessity* of the rules for war criminality?

The latter question is hard in part because it suggests a distinctive kind of modality at work. It is widely assumed that so-called “metaphysical” modality conforms to **S5** modal logic. But the modality now at issue does not. Although

⁹ Some contingent facts explain facts which are necessary. The necessary fact that I’m alive or not is explained by the contingent fact that I’m alive. But it is another, controversial matter whether that contingent fact also explains the *necessity* of the fact that I’m alive or not.

A obtained, it might not have. Had it not, then perhaps *nothing* would have explained $\Box R$. The social necessities *actually* set up may be only *contingently* set up. If so, then while it is true that $\Box R$, it *might not* have been true ($\diamond\neg\Box R$). And that, plus the duality of \Box and \diamond , entails the failure of the modal axiom **4** (which is a consequence of **S5**):

$$4. \Box\phi \rightarrow \Box\Box\phi$$

This axiom has been challenged for various directions (Chandler, 1976; Salmon, 1986, 2005). The one most relevant here is conventionalism. Suppose it is a convention that bachelors are unmarried males, and so necessary. It is contingent that this convention prevailed. Had another prevailed, it would not be necessary that bachelors are unmarried males. It is contingent that it is necessary that bachelors are unmarried males. And, so, axiom **4** fails. Its failure raises problems. The most glaring is a threat of contradiction: a convention prevailing in one locale may necessitate what another convention prevailing elsewhere demotes as contingent. There is more to say about this and other issues (Lewy, 1940; Einheuser, 2006; Sidelle, 2009). Here we only acknowledge them, not pursue them.

Social rules are often associated with conventions. But they may be especially alike in sharing a distinctive kind of modality. If so, the metaphysical import of etic theorizing is its highlighting of this distinctive kind of modality at work in social reality.¹⁰

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