

# Ideal and Nonideal Social Ontology

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a background to this published version of the panel debate at the Social Ontology 2023 conference in Stockholm, I was asked by the *Journal of Social Ontology* editors to introduce the distinction between ideal and nonideal social ontology briefly. The background and relevance of introducing this distinction is that social ontology is a rapidly growing but highly fragmented field. Moreover, this distinction can contribute to overcome this fragmentation—more specifically, by identifying and clarifying some of the central theoretical and methodological disagreements in contemporary social ontology.

In my book *Nonideal Social Ontology* (2023) I introduce and clarify the distinction in three steps: First, I develop the two-worlds metaphor of contemporary social ontology to capture the central differences between ideal and nonideal social ontology. The upshot of this first step is that one world, *ideal social ontology*, is characterized by consensus and cooperation, while the other world, *nonideal social ontology*, is characterized by conflict and contestation. Second, I show that Charles Mills' distinction between ideal and nonideal theory is useful for explaining the central dividing lines in the two-worlds metaphor of contemporary social ontology (Mills, 2005). The

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upshot of this second step is that the most significant difference between ideal and nonideal social ontology is being silent on or vocal about oppression or illegitimate power relations. The third, and most, important step, is to describe the standard model of ideal social ontology, a model that is in fact more fundamental than Mills' characterization. This model characterizes what has been a dominant research paradigm in contemporary social ontology. The standard model is exemplified by the works of Gilbert (1989/1992, 1990, 1996, 2000), Searle (1990, 1995, 2006, 2010), and Tuomela (2001, 2002, 2003, 2007). This model thus synthesizes central assumptions from the three works that shaped the research field of ideal social ontology and shows their explicit and implicit assumptions about social reality. Using the standard model is my preferred way of drawing the distinction between ideal and nonideal social ontology. I refer to the book for a description of the first and second steps. Here, I focus on the standard model of ideal social ontology.

Drawing on Mills' characterization, I understand ideal theory in social ontology, or "ideal social ontology" for short, in terms of the following features: An idealized social ontology, silence on oppression, ideal social institutions, and an idealized cognitive sphere. The silence on oppression is especially important because the most significant difference between ideal and nonideal social ontology is being silent on or vocal about oppression or illegitimate power relations. In the book *Nonideal Social Ontology*, I show that the most prominent theories in traditional social ontology (those by Searle, Gilbert, and Tuomela) share these features. Any theory that displays these four features will be referred to as "ideal social ontology." By contrast, "nonideal social ontology" will be used for any theory that rejects or lacks at least one of these features.

There is a relationship between Mills' characterization of ideal theory and the standard model of ideal social ontology, a model I develop to characterize an influential research paradigm in social ontology. The standard model of ideal social ontology is more basic, or fundamental, than Mills' distinction in the sense that most of Mills' features—an idealized social ontology, the silence on oppression, and an idealized cognitive sphere—follow from the central elements of the standard model, while another feature in Mills' characterization, ideal social institutions, is the same as in the standard model. On my account, ideal and nonideal social ontology should be understood as positions along a continuum in terms of how many of the features of the standard model of ideal social ontology they exhibit.

## 2. THE STANDARD MODEL OF IDEAL SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

This section characterizes ideal social ontology by presenting *the standard model of ideal social ontology*. The standard model is exemplified by the works of Margaret Gilbert, John Searle, and Raimo Tuomela. This model thus synthesizes central assumptions from the three works that shaped the research field of ideal social ontology and shows their explicit and implicit assumptions about social reality.<sup>1</sup> I detail it in the five categories below and explain its central elements.

### 2.1. Main Aims

- The scope claim: To offer general theories of the ontology of social and institutional reality.
- The foundation claim: Theories in social ontology are the foundation of the social sciences, either by providing and clarifying fundamental concepts or by giving an account of the nature and existence of social phenomena.

### 2.2. Basic Building Blocks and Features of Social Phenomena

- The collective intentionality claim: Collective intentionality is the basic building block of social reality and a necessary condition for the existence of either all institutions or standard institutions.
- The deonticity claim: Deontic notions such as commitment, right, and obligation, are key notions and, indeed, the very glue of society.
- The power claim: The enabling and restricting aspects of social and institutional power, such as rights and obligations, are emphasized as key phenomena.
- The reflexivity claim: Primary social phenomena are constituted by “self-fulfilling prophecies.”<sup>2</sup>
- The performativity claim: Social phenomena are created and maintained by individuals who belong to a given social group through explicit performatives or acts that have the same logical structure as performatives.

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<sup>1</sup> For a justification that these theories display all the features in the standard model, see chapter 2 of Burman (2023).

<sup>2</sup> This characteristic was discussed by Krishna Daya already in 1971.

### 2.3. Method

- Generic stylized facts: Abstract examples, void of much empirical detail, are often used as paradigmatic examples in conducting conceptual analysis.<sup>3</sup>
- The first-person point of view: The social world is to be explained through the first-person intentionalist perspective.

### 2.4. Objects of Analysis

- Collective intentionality, such as walking together.
- Institutions, such as money and private property.
- Social and institutional facts, such as the fact that Tom is a U.S. citizen.

### 2.5. Features of the Paradigmatic Social Phenomena

- The string quartet paradigm of social groups: Small and egalitarian groups as the paradigmatic example of collective intentionality.<sup>4</sup>
- The bright side of institutions: Emphasis on the benefits of institutions, such as solving collective action dilemmas and enabling action.
- The direct social phenomena: Nearly exclusive emphasis on phenomena that are directly dependent on collective intentionality.
- The visible aspects of social reality: Nearly exclusive emphasis on transparent social phenomena such as being a professor.

An underlying picture of social reality emanates from this standard model, or more precisely, from its basic building blocks and from the features of the paradigmatic social phenomena: that social reality is built on consensus rather than conflict and contestation (cf., the first world in the two-worlds metaphor). This standard model has a crucial implication: it has shaped what social ontologists take the social phenomena to be analyzed to be: direct, transparent, and deontic social phenomena built on consensus. Consequently, this model offers only a partial view of the social world while claiming it is general, and it is too limited to serve as the foundation of the social sciences.

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<sup>3</sup> Francesco Guala (2007) introduces this terminology.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is coined by Christopher Kutz (2000).

### 3. THREE CENTRAL AND REMAINING DISAGREEMENTS

Having introduced the distinction between ideal and nonideal social ontology, let's return to the fragmentation of the field in light of the standard model. This fragmentation shows in the following disagreements, which are disagreements regarding the very foundations of the research field. The first disagreement concerns the question, "Which are the social phenomena?" There is not only disagreement about what the paradigmatic social phenomena are but also regarding what phenomena count as social in the first place. Furthermore, different theories use different ontological categories, such as social objects, social facts, social kinds, and social properties of individuals. And there is disagreement about what the paradigmatic social phenomena are with respect to both content (gender, race, or money) and form, or kind (cf. Ásta 2017 and Khalidi 2015).

The second disagreement concerns the very purpose and aims of theorizing, translated into the question, "What conditions of adequacy should a theory in social ontology fulfill?" In a related concern, "Is the role of the social ontologist primarily to describe the fundamental structure and nature of social reality (or at least some of its parts) or primarily to change it?"

The third disagreement involves the philosophical method to be used in answering the research questions, especially the use or non-use of empirical case studies against which to test the theories in social ontology. These fundamental disagreements need to be resolved, or at least explicitly addressed, to make further progress.

Let's turn to the panelists' contributions and their central theoretical and methodological agreements and disagreements.

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