

# Social Ontology, Joint Intentional Activity, and Organization

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“What is Social Ontology?” This is the first of two questions that Åsa Burman asked the panelists at the 2023 Social Ontology Conference in Stockholm. My quick and easy answer for the occasion was this: Social ontology is whatever is being presented and discussed on this conference (among other venues). A look at the program of this or any other of the conferences in the series quickly reveals that Social Ontology is *a lot of things* rather than just one, and that they are as interesting as they are different from each other. Social Ontology has a wide variety of topics, it is done in different ways according to different conceptions and with different goals in mind. The breadth, with, and depth of the program together with the success of the conference series suggest that plurality matters.

Speaking as an enthusiastic participant to actual and potential fellow participants, I suggest that we let Social Ontology simply be defined as the process and the outcome of what we’re doing together in this or other venues rather than imposing any substantive conception on it.

Behind this easy suggestion is a worry. Any substantive conception of what all of us are doing is likely to capture only what *some* of us are doing and ignore others, thus excluding many of us. Or perhaps even worse yet, it will conceive of *all of us* only in terms of some of us, thus marginalizing the rest of us by accounting of them only as falling short of the model of the “true” social

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ontologist. The worry is that conceptualization easily leads to parochialism and/or imperialism.

We should aim at staying away of any such policing or disciplining such a productive discourse—if we can.

But can we really? After all, what's happening on any of the conferences of the International Social Ontology Society (or any of the other relevant venues) presupposes heavy organizational work, and organization is driven by concepts. Just think of the conference descriptions on the base of which potential participants submit their proposals, and of the selection process that filters what's being presented and discussed there. It is therefore obvious that the easy answer to Åsa Burman's question that I suggested cannot be a full answer. At least a little bit more needs to be said. What range of conceptions do the organizers, the participants, the referees have in mind? This is a descriptive task, but depending on satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the outcome, another issue arises: what is it that makes these conferences (and other activities) *good* conferences (and other activities)—or what might it be that could be made even *better*?

This leads to the second of Åsa Burman's questions: "What do we want social ontology to be?" My gut reaction to this question is to ask back: how do you mean "we"? Given the large number of participants, I cannot even start trying to give an answer for each of us. And given the pluralism I mentioned, I do not think there is a single collective answer for all of us either. If I am asked what *I personally* want social ontology to be, in terms of a field of study, I will gladly say this: In spite of my hopes for success of my own views (Schmid, 2023), I am happy with social ontology being, and continuing to be, different things, and I am reluctant to try to project any conceptual contours into an imagined future in which they might act as barriers. "Social Ontology" is a success story, as the conference series shows. We need not define or defend ourselves against "other disciplines." Enabling a dynamism of perspectives might be more important than having a fixed canon of established approaches. And cross-fertilization between different projects in a rapidly evolving field might be more fruitful than any big synthesis.

However, we can't always avoid simple definitions and short substantive descriptions. Sometimes, we—or some of us!—need to say what it is that we do.

Thus, the former ISOS president Brian Epstein gave us a definition when he wrote the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Social Ontology" (at the time of writing this, Brian Epstein is working on a revision—I am referring to the text of the 2018 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edition

in the following).

Epstein writes: “social ontology is the study of the nature and properties of the social world” (Epstein, 2018). I assume that most of us—me included—will accept this as a good way of putting things for the occasion. But it is rather likely that not all of us believe it to be literally true, or an optimal way of putting things, from their own perspective.

To illustrate the problem, here are some potential doubts:

First, does the social world (whatever it may be) really *have a nature* to speak of? If the nature of something is whatever makes it possible to know in some way of or about it, this may seem innocent enough, although perhaps a bit redundant, too—but probably not in the sense in which nature is whatever is *given*. For many of us think that the social world is *made* rather than given. Also, assuming a “nature” of the social world is probably not uncontroversial in most of the senses in which the nature of something is a substance, or some metaphysically necessary essence either.

Second, might it be true that there are *many social worlds* rather than the one social world that Epstein’s line suggests? Again, depending on how one understands the term, this may not appear as a big issue. The challenge may even appear to be futile if social world is just the total domain of social facts, however pluralistic their arrangements may be—e.g., in the sense in which talk of the domain of mental facts (or of “the mental in general”) does not preclude that each of us has a mind of their own (saying that there are mental facts, and speaking about them in general does not imply that we are all fused to just one single mind). But in another reading, the issue is sensitive and potentially controversial: if it is from *our own perspective* that we social ontologists approach the “social world,” there *is* a meaningful debate about generalizations to a total domain of social facts (similar to—and perhaps more relevant than—the “problem of other minds” as it arises within a first-personal approach to the philosophy of mind).

A third and more fundamental challenge could perhaps be raised against *either* “world” or “worlds” as a definition of the topic of social ontology. As obvious as it may seem that social ontology is about such things (or entities) as social norms and statuses, social structures and artifacts, social agents and identities, the “things” (or entities)-approach might be seen as a problem. Might such a conception of the topic of social ontology be just a *reification* or *objectification* of what it is that we’re really studying? Is “a world of social entities” a misconception of what’s really just *our way of living together*—an alienating misconception that we social ontologists, of all people, should carefully avoid or even help to overcome?

To be sure, these challenges arise from particular interpretations of the elements of the definition, and they involve particular (and perhaps somewhat peculiar) views of social ontology. There are certainly perspectives from which these are not challenges at all, but merely potential misunderstandings. But this does not undermine the point. We don't agree, and this even extends to the question of whether we disagree.

This situation is quite typical for academic philosophy. This is no coincidence; despite our commitments to interdisciplinarity, it seems that at present, most social ontologists self-identify as academic philosophers. But this situation is also *a bit of an embarrassment*. If in many places, academic philosophy still enjoys high social reputation, it probably does so based on the ascription of some special conceptual competence. More than scholars from other fields, philosophers are expected to be able to answer “what is...”-questions—particularly so, of course, if they are asked *philosophically*. Thus, a chemist or a historian may defer to philosophy when it comes to determining in that way what it is they are doing *philosophically*. But philosophers have nobody to pass on the buck. We are expected to *know*—have an account of—what it is we are doing. Conceptual competence involves reflective clarity. But for us, together, this is hardly something we can claim to have collectively achieved.

“Let's do great things together,” Åsa Burman said in the opening ceremony of the 2023 Social Ontology conference in Stockholm. It is certainly an inspiring motto. But it also involves a problem. For how can we (together) do great things (together) if we don't even agree on what it is that we're doing, how it is to be done, and why it is that we're doing it in the first place?

The problem involves a deep issue in the theory of joint action, but a pragmatic solution lies in *organization*. Academic philosophy has *organizational means* to deal with the problem that philosophy is a cooperative venture in which the participants are engaged under very different descriptions thereof (to use Anscombe's term), and we use these organizational measures in social ontology, too.

One organizational measure is the *formation of a canon of “classical” authors*, and or of academic schools, typically with leading figures whom we give some degree of authority to define for the rest of us what it is we're doing, how we're doing it, and why. Not having an account of what we're doing together ceases to be an embarrassment if it is transformed into, e.g., a disagreement *over Plato*.

A second organizational measure is *specialization and smaller-scale networking*—our organization grew out of such a network, and as we are growing, there might be further sub-specializations.

A third organizational measure is *peer-refereeing*, and thus the social construction of a “field” or “discipline” with a current “state of the art.”

Each of these organizational measures is efficient in its function, and together, they substitute for a sense of knowing, collectively, what it is we’re doing together. We do not really need to know, collectively, what it is we are doing together, as long as each of us knows what it takes to be accepted at the relevant conferences, or in the relevant publication venues. But let’s face it, these organizational substitutes are just that: substitutes, and relying on them too much comes at a hefty price. Peer-refereeing as a way of constructing a “discipline” with a “state of the art” enforces redundancy: As a consequence of refereeing practices, participants refer to the same texts, repeat the same claims, and talk in the same jargon. You found a fruitful way of talking about new things and say things that haven’t been said before? You better translate this into established jargon and reference some big authors, or you will be desk rejected, or, worse yet, chastised by your referee peers. This is what constitutes a “discipline” with a “state of the art” or “current discourse”: enforced redundancy, reduction of variety.

Redundancy makes academic philosophy boring. Specialization and splitting up in smaller groups might give us the illusion that we could secure a niche of agreed-upon privileged expertise in a field that we have for ourselves, have deep insights there, and ignore outsiders. The problem of this, and the problems of academic schools with authoritative leaders, and with canons of “classics” is self-evident, I assume.

Possible organizational means for the purpose are probably not limited to the ways of academic organization. In the history of social thought, authors have often understood what they were doing as a contribution to (support of, participation in) a social or political movement, or a type of social organization, and this may not be completely alien to social ontologists, past or present. In fact, the first book (that I know of) that has “social ontology” in its title is presented by the author as *revolutionary*: a defense of the system established by the French Revolution against reactionary tendencies, particularly against contemporary (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) political Catholicism (Massip, 1871). But defining social ontology—as a whole—in terms of any particular engagement or partisan political agenda has the disadvantage of excluding those of us who, from any such point of view, appear as “disengaged” or, worse yet, as “opposed.”

In other words, it seems that organization can cover up, to *some* degree, the embarrassment of not having an agreed-upon account of what it is we’re doing together, how we’re doing it, and why—and perhaps no less importantly, who’s in “we,” and who’s not.

I do not wish to deny that we need disciplines, schools, current discourses, classics etc., and that there are fruitful forms of engaged philosophical research. Redundancy is boring, but so is what appears as incomprehensible gibberish (just recall your first encounter with academic philosophy, when you weren't properly trained—or disciplined?—yet). The classics or “big figures” can serve as a sort of medium of exchange even if their composition is marked by the nastiness of our histories. And I certainly know of no better way of selection than peer refereeing.

What I want to suggest instead, in terms of a somewhat less easy and superficial answer, is that we should not think of our organizational measures and corresponding self-conceptions as *constitutive* of who we, together, are. Rather, we should think of them as our tools.

To support this, I recommend deepening our understanding of what it means to be active together. Let me hint at just one point here.

Who are we, the social ontologists? We need not have an agreed-upon conception of who's a social ontologist, who isn't, and why to get to work together. Indeed, we do not need any conception. Just as we can start *right here* even if we don't know, or disagree on where we are, and just as we can start *right now* even if we don't know, or don't agree on what time it is, we can start *together* even if we don't know who's in “we” and why (and similarly for what it is we're doing, how, and why). The core sense of the plural “we” is non-referential; plural self-identity is pre-conceptual (Schmid 2023, ch. 2).

In the discussion following the panel presentation at the 2023 Stockholm Social Ontology conference, a very productive contributor to the development of the field stated that they do not label themselves as a social ontologist. I take this to support the basic point: we *need* not self-categorize in this or any other way in order to be productive, and to be productive together. But this does not mean that we need not care about categories and labels *at all*. Categories matter for whatever it might be that we're doing at *some* points. We need not worry about the identity of the field in order to be able to enjoy the fruits of cooperation. But it is certainly good to have a *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Social Ontology, too. It matters for what we're doing together that more and more of us list social ontology among their areas of specialization, and that social ontology is increasingly recognized as a field of research.

We can act together without any agreed-upon conception of what it is that we are doing, how we are doing it, and why. But to act *rationally* together—to make sure that we're *effective* in what we're doing together—, we need organization, and organization relies on reflective conceptions of what it

is we're doing, who's in, who's doing what, and why.

But for organization to be good, it should be known by the participants that it is just a tool. Good organization is not mistaken for what it organizes, it is not mistaken for the agent behind the joint action. As much as possible, good organization supports joint intentional activities and allows for spontaneity without imposing too much in terms of the conceptions on which it relies.

This is not an easy task, but it is tackled admirably by those in charge of *our* organizations. Åsa Burman and her team of organizers of the 2023 Social Ontology conference have done a wonderful job, and so does Stephanie Collins, the current president of the International Social Ontology Society.

To conclude: Åsa Burman's two questions have led me to make a point about joint intentional activity, and a point about organization. The point about joint intentional activity is that it need not be intentional under any agreed-upon "description." The point about organization is that it presupposes conceptualization, that this is necessary for joint intentional activity to be carried out *rationally*, and that organization should not be mistaken for what it is that is being organized. As it happens, joint intentional activity and organization are two topics that have figured prominently on the agenda of recent social ontology, but what I have said about these topics very much challenges what is assumed in the most established accounts. It seems to me that as a group, we social ontologists are still much better in our actual shared intentional practices than we are in our theories of being active together.

A recent suggestion is that social ontologists should turn away from these old topics and to pay more attention to issues of social structure and oppression. As much as I see the need for the latter, I am not convinced that it should involve the former. I do not think that taking shared intentional activities to be a core phenomenon commits to "ideal" theorizing that fails to relate to the harsh realities of the social world. Even the received theories are not "ideal theories"—rather, they are *not good enough* theories. They are predicated on individualistic pre-conceptions of agency, they are over-intellectualized and overly conceptual. Most of all, they fail to engage with the right sort of "deep" stuff such as subjectivity, or the basic role of self-consciousness in agency. Instead, they bottom out in common knowledge, mutual beliefs, plans, or aggregation procedures.

Just selecting from the shelf of pre-fabricated Anscombian, Davidsonian, Frankfurtian, Vellemanian (or what have you) conceptions of agency will not do to improve the situation.

We need to think deeper about agency together in order to understand how it is, or can be, shared among us. We can then see more realistically how

it is that we live together, too. Our living together is not a case of “going for a walk together,” and it should perhaps better not be modelled on this example, as it was traditionally done.

The second part of the short introductory paragraph of Brian Epstein’s *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry says that Social Ontology “is concerned with analyzing the various entities in the world that arise from social interaction” (Epstein, 2018). Brian Epstein is known for doubting the claim that shared intention is a basic issue for social ontology. But given the weight that he places on the concept of *social interaction*, one might wonder just what it is meant to mean.

A good place to start is received social and sociological theory—I recommend reading Talcott Parsons on the topic, and perhaps, on his footsteps, Niklas Luhmann. They had a clear conception of interaction, and they argued that to understand how it is possible (given the “multiple contingency” that it involves), we need to move beyond action theory, and adopt a systems theoretic framework. In economic theory, the issue has come up again as the problem of how it is that conventions rationalize coordination, and it has been recognized as basic. For those who would rather stick to action theory rather than switch to a systems theoretic approach, but still doubt that understanding shared intention is relevant to social ontology (or indeed the one basis from which the “various entities” of the social world “arise”), it might be worth not ignoring these theoretically minded debates in social science. This may lead to renewed appreciation of the work being done among our circles to understand joint intentional activity.

## REFERENCES

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