

Social Ontology: Where Now?

Ásta

Philosophy is taking a social turn. My colleague Kevin Richardson even wrote a blog post about it recently on *DailyNous* (Richardson, 2023). Of course I immediately have to qualify that: analytic philosophy is taking a social turn. And, of course, people in the analytic tradition and on the margins of that tradition and outside of that tradition have been attending to social phenomena for a long time. This very society, the International Social Ontology Society (ISOS), has held meetings and sponsored events and a journal to foster community among people working on social phenomena, starting at the turn of the century.

I want to say a couple of things regarding this turn that pertain to social ontology as a field, and to ISOS.

As I see it, there are two main aspects to the social turn. The first is that more philosophical attention is being given to social phenomena. The other is increasing awareness of the social conditions in which philosophy is produced and how it impacts our work and what we write and talk about.

First let us think about our field. Social ontology practiced at our meetings at ISOS has until recently been devoted to enquiries into the intentional: joint attention, joint intention, joint intentional action, collective acceptance, joint commitment, and related phenomena such as institutional construction, and collective responsibility. All of these are hugely important, but we have not paid much attention to topics that are now coming to the fore, topics that need not involve explicit intentional action or formal institutional

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Ásta, Duke University, E-mail: asta.asta@duke.edu

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structures. This should further enrich our field of study, and may even pose a challenge to the way social ontology tends to be done. Could it be that our social reality, even institutional reality, is also shaped by the products of non intentional collective actions, and the massive systematic causal fallout from those? If it is, and I submit it does, then not only does that call for more attention to topics that have been neglected, but it may also require us to rethink the approach to the traditional topics. If we want to give a descriptive account of the construction of institutions can we neglect the informal and even non intentional processes? Can we ignore the “noise and friction” as Michael Bratman called it during his keynote “Shared Agency, Institutional Agency and the Core Capacity Conjecture” (2023)? Or is it time for social ontology to take a turn towards non-ideal theory as Åsa Burman and Johan Brännmark advocate?

The charge that we social ontologists are doing ideal theory looks different from the charge that is directed at political or moral philosophers because in the social ontology case, the charge is usually leveled against descriptive projects. We want to describe reality! The danger is that one ends up describing an ideal system, not the messy reality one wants to capture. The normative theorist faces a graver danger as they are out to devise a system that is to have normative pull on us, messy ordinary people, not a pull on an agent who has some ideal features that we ordinary mortals lack and who lives under conditions us ordinary mortals can barely fathom.

So my first point: I think we should take seriously the worry that when we engage in descriptive social ontology we are doing ideal theory in a way that is inadequate. Perhaps we will have worried for nothing. It may end up being that a certain level of abstraction is ok, but we should at least take the worry seriously.

Now to my second point. There is another potential danger of descriptive social ontology. If you think, as I do, that various parts of our social reality, such as social categories of people, are products of ideological practices and institutions and causal consequences of that, then if you give a descriptive account of such social phenomena you are in danger of only providing an analysis or illumination of the content of the ideology, which can even contribute to further entrenching the ideology. I think that for that reason, we should keep front and center what we want the theory for (I learned that from Sally Haslanger), and a descriptive project should ideally be accompanied by a normative project. At the very least, we should point to how we could intervene in or question aspects of the ideological construction.

On to a different point about our field. Social ontology has entered the mainstream. The mainstreaming of social ontology has some dangers. We have to be on the lookout for what Kevin Richardson called “Columbusing” which is the tendency to waltz in and think you have discovered something. A related phenomenon is importing concepts, distinctions, and other tools that have been developed for one sort of phenomenon or enquiry and mapping it onto another domain where it doesn’t fit so well. Importing can be exceedingly fruitful, but the need for a theoretical distinction or apparatus must have its origin in the exploration of the social phenomenon itself; we should not be playing darts with metaphysical machinery developed to explore some other phenomena and praying that one of them sticks to the dartboard.

What can help us guard against this? Here reading social theory (this is an umbrella term for a lot of different approaches) and interpretive and empirical social science can help us. It also helps with our Columbusing.

Let me close by mentioning the other aspect of the social turn. This is increased awareness of and attention to the conditions of philosophy production. It can generate interest in new topics and interact in various ways with the study of social phenomena, but is at core methodological.

Philosophy has gone through various such developments before. With the early moderns we have become aware of the possible impact, or limitation, of our own cognitive structure on what we can know about the objects we encounter.

More recently have we become aware of the possibility that our values and potential biases may influence our perception and thought. And if we allow that values and biases have a social dimension, we get that our social conditions may influence our perception and thought.

But philosophy is also a social enterprise and we are increasingly aware of how we are differently situated, epistemically as well as socially and politically, with respect to various topics we talk about. How risky it is to entertain certain topics varies. Some of us have a lot at stake; for others of us it is a mere philosophical puzzle.

As we go forward, I think it is important for us social ontologists to be mindful of how differently situated we are with regard to the various topics we study. I actually think it is beneficial for people differently situated to discuss topics together, but an awareness of that is important. There is obviously a lot more to say, but I will stop here.

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