A Naturalistic Approach to Social Ontology

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The topic suggested for the panel was method in social ontology and how we might move work in the area forward. I'm a pluralist about method and think that it is a mistake to dictate method for a particular topic. Pluralism about method enables us to see different aspects of a phenomenon that are important for different purposes. In this essay, I will describe how I work in social ontology, but do not intend to prescribe it for everyone. Let many flowers bloom!

In addition to pluralist, I am also interdisciplinary in all of my work. This interdisciplinarity emerged from my research in feminist theory and critical race theory. When thinking about gender or race, philosophers cannot plausibly offer theories without empirical input. In the context of women's, gender, and sexuality studies over the past five decades, we have organized research by placing gender (or sexuality, or other categories under consideration) at the center, and come together as teachers and scholars to use the tools of multiple disciplines to understand it. On this model, disciplinary approaches intersect and influence each other in the study of the phenomenon, new tools emerge that were unavailable in the traditional "malestream," and then we return to the disciplines with insights about how to better integrate gender and race sensitive methods and insights into ongoing work. (See Figure 1)

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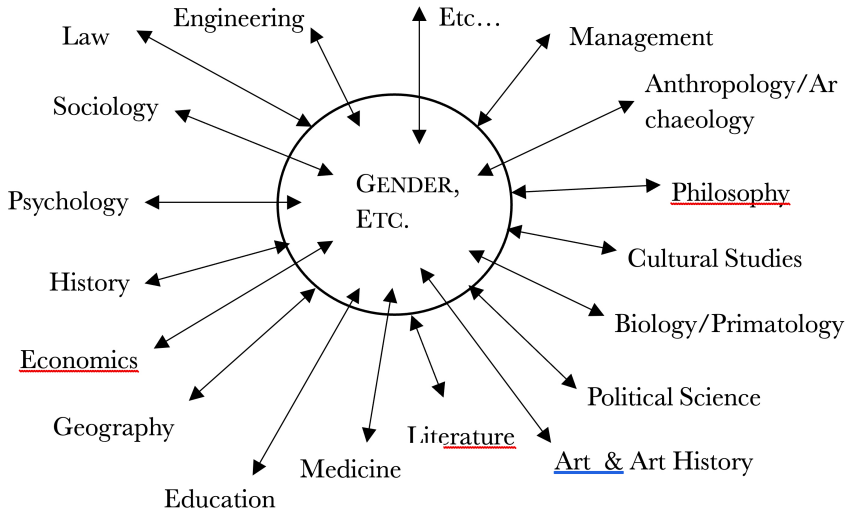
Figure 1.

So how does social *ontology* fit into this? I am a Quinean without the (natural) scientism (Quine, 1948). The *project of ontology cannot be divorced from a first-order theory about a phenomenon.* As I understand the task of social ontology we develop the best social theory in response to our (legitimate) questions, and then figure out what it is committed to.[1] Social ontology emerges from social theory.

Social theory is not the same as sociology. It is, itself, an interdisciplinary project that considers broad questions about how societies emerge, change, interact, and collapse at different levels of analysis; to do this, it also considers the role of agents, laws, structures, geography, and such. Social theory is not value-free. Just as the questions of medicine are concerned with the wellbeing of humans, the questions of social theory are concerned with the survival and stability of social systems and their good or bad impacts on agents.[2] Philosophy

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1   Legitimate questions are, for example, ones that do not have false presuppositions, ones that are articulated with meaningful predicates, and ones that we have good reason to pose. See Anderson (1995).

2   On this approach, the social world is part of the natural world (Rosen, 1994). Moreover, it rejects a fact/value distinction that presumes that the "natural" world is devoid of

has a special role to play in articulating the epistemic credentials of the theory, the background normative assumptions, and the ontology.

Critical social theory is one form of social theory. As Nancy Fraser describes it:

> To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age." [Letter to Ruge] What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. It makes no claim to any special epistemological status but, rather, supposes that with respect to justification there is no philosophically interesting difference between a critical theory of society and an uncritical one. However, there is, according to this definition, an important political difference. A critical social theory frames its research program and conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical identification. […] Thus, for example, if struggles contesting the subordination of women figured among the most significant of a given age, then a critical social theory for that time would aim, among other things, to shed light on the character and basis of such subordination. It would employ categories and explanatory models that revealed rather than occluded relations of male dominance and female subordination. And it would demystify as ideological any rival approaches that obfuscated or rationalized those relations. (Fraser 1989, 113)

As I understand Fraser's point, feminist philosophy can begin from different sets of questions. One set of questions begins within the mainstream philosophical tradition and provides insight into the ways that questions have sometimes neglected important topics and offered androcentric answers. For example, feminists have considered mind-body relations, freedom and autonomy, epistemic skepticism, communicative dynamics in philosophy of language, and moral responsibility, and have suggested interventions that correct for bias and introduce new topics for consideration. Feminist philosophy also raises questions from within social theory, especially critical social theory. As Fraser suggests, responsible social movements depend on good

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value (Anscombe, 1958; Foot, 2003; Murdoch, 2014; Midgley, 2005; Diamond, 1991; Crary, 2011). The value-ladenness of scientific inquiry has a long history, and is a significant thread in feminist epistemology. See Anderson (1995).

research to explain social inequality and to provide theoretical tools to capture the phenomena that have been ignored or marginalized. As suggested above, philosophers have much to add to such projects. Of course the two sets of questions and their answers are intertwined, and social ontology can emerge from both.

But, you might ask, what makes a theory a *social* theory? So far I've only said that social theory takes up questions about society. But do all questions about society concern what is properly "social?" For example, if I ask how tall is the tallest building in the United States, and learn that it is 1,776 feet (the height of One World Trade Center in New York City, colloquially known as the "Freedom Tower"), it is hard to know how that is related to social ontology. The question seems to be about United States society, but the height of a building seems to be a physical fact, not a social fact. I suggest that how to treat it depends on how the question and answer fit within a broader social theory. (See also Haslanger 2016 and 2022) Why does the questioner want to know the height of the building? Is it part of a study of the risks posed by skyscrapers? Is it part of an analysis of class relations in urban areas? Is it linking building size to national identity, pride, or power? How is that building and its height situated within American history? A building's height may be socially significant (this one is a hat tip to the date of American independence from Britain) and so we may have reason to include buildings and their heights in our social ontology.

This raises a background question however: what is it for something to be *social*? I don't think it is possible to give necessary and sufficient conditions for sociality, and it is likely that any attempt will be circular. However, there are currently two main approaches for thinking about sociality that are relevant to social ontology. One is the collective intentionality approach, and the other is the social learning approach. According to the first approach, what makes something social is its dependence on a kind of collective intentionality—the joint intentionality of individual agents in their activities. Some view social entities as *made up of* agents sharing intentionality, as a hunk of clay may constitute a statue or a vase. On this approach, the central cases of sociality are groups such as committees or friends engaged in an activity together; the committee isn't just a set of individuals, but is made up of individuals who are collectively engaged in an activity (Gilbert 1989; Bratman 1992; et al.). Others take collective intentionality to *produce* social entities: collective agreement transforms objects (pieces of paper, stones, metal disks) into money (Searle 1995; et al.). On both views, the source of sociality is our ability to share attitudes.

Work in animal studies and cultural evolution show, however, that collective intentionality is possible only after creatures are *already social* in the sense that they are capable of learning from con-specifics, and pass what they learn across generations, without waiting for (biological) evolutionary processes to do their work. (See also Haslanger 2019, Zawidzki 2013) Social learning takes forms that does not require sophisticated meta-cognition that is required for full-scale intentionality and communication (cf. Grice).

> [A] cognitive precondition of cooperative foraging is the existence of a flow of information across the generations. Cultural learning of this kind can begin and can become important without the active cooperation of the source of information. Agents leak information in their everyday activities. Moreover, they often adaptively structure the learning environment of their young as a by- product of their own utilitarian activities. (Sterelny 2012, 12-13)

And such flows of information are entwined with and shape our material conditions. The world of social animals is "loopy" in the sense that patterns of cooperation affect the material conditions of the group, which reinforce the patterns of cooperation. This contributes to *niche construction,* i.e., circumstances in which the organism influences its own evolution, by being both the object of natural selection and the creator of the conditions of that selection. (Levins & Lewontin 1985, 106) Social (or cultural) learning results in *social niche construction*:

> Organisms that alter their own environment often change their descendants' environment, too […] Children inherit a world and a set of material and cognitive tools from their parents, not just their genes. As a consequence of the interactions between their parents and their parents' world, children inherit an altered set of selective forces and developmental resources. (Sterelny 2012, 175)

In short, social learning creates culture. And culture is both shaped by and shapes agents and their material conditions so that they are responsive to each other in flexible ways that facilitate coordination (Haslanger, 2019). A society is (roughly) a complex dynamic system in which social animals (not just human animals) coordinate to survive and flourish in their environment. If social theory is to explain both the stability and the evolution of societies, it cannot just focus on the mental states of individuals or groups, but *must take into account the interaction between the group and its environment.* How the

environment is altered by patterns of cooperation is not necessarily intentional, nevertheless it is part of a social process that sustains social continuity.

Buildings—such as One World Trade Center—are the result of such world/culture/agent interaction and have social meaning. Although social ontology is not usually in the business of creating an inventory of particular social items (we probably don't need to list One World Trade Center in our ontology), a social ontology should include artifacts (human and non-human) that are part of the processes of niche construction, for these are crucial not only for survival, but for giving our lives meaning.

Here are some of what I take to be the consequences of this approach to social ontology:

- *Social ontology cannot be a priori,* because it falls out of empirical social theory. Even if the process of deriving ontology from theory is in some sense a priori, the theory it is derived from is not.

- *Social ontology must be interdisciplinary* because it depends on interdisciplinary social theory. We can't tell what a social theory is committed to without being conversant with it.

- Social ontology should include activities and relationships that *do not depend on collective intentionality.* It may include social activities and signaling of non-human animals; it may include forms of human engagement that are aren't propositional or even fully intentional.

- The social world is *interdependent* with the material world— *so the materiality of the social domain, and its role in sustaining sociality, is central* to social theory, and so social ontology.

- Critical social ontology should be attentive to the pressing "struggles and wishes of the age," i.e., *draw on and contribute to contemporary social movements.*

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