The Paths of Social Ontology

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Where is social ontology going? Although a crucial question for evaluating the progress made in this philosophical area, until we have a clear idea of how to locate the various projects therein, we can hardly think of any particular direction. To suggest an answer, then, I will begin by introducing a simple, though still informative, map. Subsequently, I will use this map to show, on the one hand, that social ontology is actually moving; and, on the other, that this movement is not taking one but various paths.

To keep things tidy from the start, let me clarify first *what* social ontology is. While there are several characterisations out there, I think that Brian Epstein's proposal can be particularly helpful here: "Social ontology is the study of the nature and properties of the social world. It is concerned with analyzing the various entities in the world that arise from social interaction" (Epstein, 2018). Though very general, the way in which Epstein construes this research area allows us to see, firstly, that social ontology is part of a general metaphysics (as concerned with both the existence and the nature of things); and secondly, that it deals with those entities that result from social interaction (including perhaps the phenomenon of social interaction itself). So, from this basic understanding, we can appreciate straightforwardly why, for example, certain "abstract" (as opposed to "material") questions about social reality have been more dominant, or certain "analytical" (as opposed to "critical") approaches to sociality have been more encouraged. In short: it has been taken to be part of the very conception of social ontology that it is committed to an abstract and

neutral examination of the social world. But while this might be the starting point, it is by no means all the ground that social ontology can now claim to have covered.

To find out both where social ontology is and where it is going, I will introduce a general map that can help us to locate the main projects within this philosophical discipline. To begin with, let us assume that the most general theoretical space of philosophical research comprises three sections. The first is about its *scope,* the second is about its *method,* and the third is about its *level of inquiry.* To simplify things, let us consider only two parts for each section. For scope, we have "global" and "local" theories (depending on whether they want to provide general principles, valid across all possible contexts, or rather more specific and targeting criteria). For method, we have "analytical" and "critical" approaches (depending on whether they adopt a descriptive or a normative perspective). And for levels of inquiry, we have "first-order" or "second-order" investigation (depending on whether they are interested in questions about some particular phenomena, or in elucidating the methodology for answering such questions).

While not pretending to be exhaustive, I think that the combination of these six parts can give us an idea not only of where to locate different projects in social ontology, but also of their internal relations and the way in which they can connect with other neighbouring areas (e.g., jurisprudence, moral philosophy, and political theory).

If we look at what some social ontologists (e.g., Francesco Guala 2007 and Åsa Burman 2023) call "standard" theories of social ontology, we can very easily identify their position within this map. In the case of John Searle (2010), Raimo Tuomela (2013), Margaret Gilbert (2013), and Michael Bratman (2014), for example, their work seeks to provide a general account of social reality (in particular, of collective intentionality, group agency, and institutional facts) that is valid in most (if not all) circumstances of sociality. Also, and perhaps as a consequence of this, they employ analytical methodology which aims at explaining rather than evaluating the social phenomenon under consideration (e.g., how individuals come to perform actions together, how they constitute groups with their own capacity to act, and what makes institutional reality possible). And to the extent that their explanations are about such a phenomenon (instead of, e.g., the way in which we come to think and talk about it), they are engaged in first-order levels of investigation.

But "standard" theories of social ontology are no longer mainstream (consider, for instance, the growing number of publications on *critical* social ontology). As it appears to me now, we are more likely to find that current

discussions in social ontology are moving away from these global, analytical, and first-order parameters. Though, to make it clear, this does not mean that those central topics of classical social ontology have already been abandoned. Instead, I believe that such foundational questions as "What is a social group?" or "What does it take for some people to intend to do something together?" are very much alive. The point I want to make here, to put it otherwise, is that these questions are not at the centre of contemporary discussions in social ontology anymore; rather, they are spread throughout more specific debates, for example, about the construction of social kinds, the (causal or non-causal) relationship between social and non-social entities, the social power involved in the interactions that produce and re-produce specific social structures, the cognitive, conative, and affective content of collective attitudes, the obligations and responsibilities of highly organised groups, etc. The interesting question, then, is *where is social ontology going, in relation to those standard or classical topics?*

From looking at the most recent work on social categories (e.g., race, gender, and disability), we can notice very clearly that there is some crucial distance from standard theories of social ontology. For example, in their important and very influential contributions, Sally Haslanger (2012) and Ásta (2018) have developed, in their own terms, local theories of race and gender (e.g., by focusing on the specific historical and cultural contexts where those categories emerge, and not only submitting general principles for universal accounts). Moreover, they have approached these social phenomena from a critical, rather than an analytical perspective (e.g., by highlighting the negative impact of using such categories to classify and divide people, instead of simply stating the facts that constitute their existence). And although the questions here (e.g., what is race/gender and how does it affect our lives in society?) are primarily of first-order investigation, they also involve significant consideration of second-order issues (viz., concerning the philosophical methods that must be used in explaining the basic or fundamental facts that determine the membership conditions of a racial/gender group).[1]

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1   An important caveat is in order here. I have been advised by both Ásta and Haslanger (during the panel session of ISOS 2023 in Stockholm) that their theories are mostly global (as opposed to local) and analytical (as opposed to critical). Though this is not the place to engage in a discussion as to which label fits their projects better, my point is only that they are each interested not only in providing a general understanding of social categories, but also in assessing the circumstances in which they operate and affect our lives (e.g., producing social injustice). If this is correct, then (and this is all I want to say here) their views are not as global and analytical as the classical or standard theories of social ontology. For one, because the circumstances for the corresponding assessment are susceptible of change. Indeed, this

But views in contemporary social ontology are not all so distant from their classical counterparts. For example, certain projects about collective responsibility, group knowledge, social practices, and artifacts are placed more in the middle. Take, for instance, collective responsibility. Here, we can find both global and local views (depending, e.g., on whether the project aims to establish the general requirements for distributing responsibility amongst group members, or to answer a specific problem of responsibility attribution concerning particular state- or corporate-actions). Also, while some theorists approach this social phenomenon from an analytical perspective (e.g., trying to identify the constitutive elements of "collective" as opposed to "individual" responsibility), some others take a more critical stance (e.g., calling attention to the risks of including collectives within the reach of our normative evaluations). And similarly, there appears to be an equal engagement with first- and second-order levels of investigation (e.g., in elucidating both the circumstances of group agency as a necessary element of collective responsibility, as well as the semantics and pragmatics of responsibility judgements).

In general terms, then, to the extent that social ontologists cross each other's paths and blend all these options when carrying out their own research projects, contemporary social ontology can be seen as moving in various directions. So, while there is no specific place to which social ontology is going, perhaps the best way to understand its progress is precisely in term of how much ground it has now managed to cover. In this sense, an adequate appraisal of the richness of this philosophical area should not consider how "disruptive" some projects are in relation to the standard or classical theories; it should scrutinise instead how those lines of inquiry overlap in some parts (e.g., in pursuing more global aims) while advancing on others (e.g., approaching a certain social phenomenon from a more critical perspective). Exactly where social ontology is going, then, depends on which parts of the map social ontologists want to explore with their particular research agendas. Our attitude towards this, I believe, should not be of drawing sharp borders amongst these parts, but of constructing new bridges to keep them all in permanent communication.

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is something that Haslanger herself acknowledges very openly: "It is a rare book that has 'timeless' value. But especially because of *the nature of the project*, my hope is that this book will be, at best, useful for a while, and will then become obsolete as our social conditions and narrative resources evolve" (Haslanger 2012, 30; emphasis added).

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