

Bridging the Gap: Social Ontology and the Social Sciences

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to discuss social ontology and where it is possibly heading, without first noting a challenge: just what we are talking about? On the one hand, social ontology is by philosophical standards a very young field, with first steps being taken as late as the 1980s by philosophers like Raimo Tuomela (1984) and Margaret Gilbert (1989). On the other hand, the history of philosophy (from Plato and onwards) provides many examples of social ontologies in the sense of theories about how human societies are constituted and what their key features are. But things are even more complicated. Even if we stick to analytic philosophy, there are important overlaps with at least action theory, political philosophy, the philosophy of the social sciences, and metaphysics. What counts as social ontology and what counts as something else? But then it is also unclear why we should stick to analytic philosophy. Marxism and critical theory have long had a focus on understanding human societies and how they are structured, and work done in and influenced by post-structuralism has had social construction as a recurring theme. And outside of philosophy, social theory features many examples of abstract and general work about the nature and functioning of societies, institutions, practices, and other social entities.

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Especially if we start talking about this much bigger map of various disciplines and approaches where topics that can reasonably be sorted under the label “social ontology” are being discussed, one thing is clear: we are talking about an immense literature. No-one can have a complete overview of everything written on these topics, except perhaps very superficially. All that one can really do is to talk about how things appear from one’s own particular vantage point—and then if there are several of us doing so, perhaps some interesting patterns or contrasts will emerge. Space is also limited here, so in articulating some of my own impressions I will largely just state them. Some examples will be provided, but this will not be a lit review or a proper argument. Before I start, I should however then say something about my entry point. While I recently joined a Department of Philosophy again, I have spent the last twelve years in an interdisciplinary social sciences and humanities environment, working with colleagues that originally often came from monodisciplinary backgrounds, but now worked in subjects like Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Human Rights, International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies, International Migration and Ethnic Relations, Urban Studies, and others. I am hardly unique in being a philosopher with experience of working with people from other disciplines and I certainly cannot claim that what I learned in doing so is representative of the social sciences (and humanities)¹ in general. Yet this background does nevertheless prompt me to approach things here from a specific experience: the gap that I often felt between what I as a social ontologist did and what my colleagues as empirical researchers did, even though we were often in a way interested in similar things. How might that gap be bridged?

2. BEYOND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

One obvious remedy to difficulties in communicating across academic fields is of course to read more broadly—in this case: to engage with research in the social sciences and the socially oriented parts of the humanities. One problem is however that there is just so much work out there. It is hard enough to keep up with what is published in social ontology! And just sampling some work here and there outside of philosophy might not be all that illuminating.

Still, having shared references and being able to locate what one is doing in those terms does help in communicating across disciplinary

1 The boundary between the social sciences and the humanities is far from sharp in how many researchers actually work and which methods they employ; what is mainly of interest in the present context is empirical research on societies and what goes in within them, not the exact label that is put on things.

boundaries. One thing that I personally found occasionally helpful was that I had put at least some effort into broadening my *philosophical* horizons. There are many empirical disciplines where philosophical works are standard references. Granted, some might not be by authors who primarily self-identified as philosophers. But above all: a lot of it falls within what analytic philosophers tend to label “continental philosophy.” Marxism and critical theory, post-structuralism and post-colonial theory, more recently post-human and decolonial theory, and so on. Once you dig deeper, there are of course lots of differences and varieties, but the point is that extending your philosophical map so that non-analytic philosophy is not just a vast *terra incognita* can sometimes make it easier to converse with academics outside of philosophy.

But are not some of these theorists basically unreadable (someone might ask)? Well, actually, no. It is just that one might have to read differently. In analytic philosophy, we often seem to think that to properly understand something, you need to properly nail it down. Contemporary work in the analytic tradition has definitely loosened up a bit, not just chiselling away towards ever improved analyses or definitions of things. But the ideal is still that you capture things primarily through *precision work*. The approach in a lot of what goes under the label of “continental philosophy” is different, more like circling around something, looking at it from different perspectives or angles, and gradually getting a better grasp of it. The improved understanding that you get from this process cannot then just be condensed down to a neat summary. Indeed, from that perspective, trying to nail things down once and for all in a few terse sentences might seem at best naïve, and at worst an almost violent imposition of a single perspective when there are many. This also means that when reading works in that style one cannot expect there to be clear-cut takeaways continuously throughout the text. What gradually emerges can be understood as an image coming more and more into focus, rather than a building getting constructed brick by brick.

Of course, one should not exaggerate the differences here. It is more like a continuum. While theorists far apart on that continuum can be *very* different from each other, gradual movements along it are possible—it is not an either-or thing. At least to begin with, familiarizing oneself with some key authors can be helpful not just in possibly getting valuable inputs to one’s own theorizing, but also in communicating with many researchers in other disciplines. Take Foucault as an example. His influence is huge, and at least knowing the basics of what is involved in a Foucauldian account of power is simply a given in

many quarters.² This is not to say that everyone there will have studied his works meticulously (far from it), but knowing at least roughly what they are about will be a help in many conversations.

Some movements in this direction are already happening in social ontology. Sally Haslanger is perhaps the best example, engaging especially with Marxism and critical theory (e.g. Haslanger 2021), but there are others as well.³ It is too early to tell whether these tendencies are the early stages of more large-scale developments to come. But at least if one wants social ontology to increase its overlaps with other disciplines and its potential for uptake there, further movements in this direction would probably be a good thing.

3. MATTERS OF INTERPRETATION

One thing that arguably tends to characterize not just social ontology (in the analytic vein) but analytic philosophy in general is an idea about the sciences, and also the social sciences, as trying to ascertain causal connections between things. Scientific explanation is then primarily about causal explanation.

But at least for the social world, one could also think that what we are faced with is an often messy and murky realm where a lot of what goes on and a lot of what we are faced with will be open to different interpretations. Many social scientists, and socially oriented researchers in the humanities, work with something like that picture of the social world. Indeed, quite a few of the ones most interested in questions about social construction would probably find that many (analytic) social ontologists seem to labor under a problematic positivist conception of the social sciences. Now, there is no need here for rehearsing battles about method that have occasionally flared up in the social sciences—the more sensible line to take is ecumenical: that there is room for many different approaches and methods, and that they might even be complementary. Still: unless one wants to dismiss large parts of what is done in the social sciences and humanities as pseudo-science, which is quite the argumentative burden to take on, one needs to recognize that a lot of research is focused on interpretative matters, doing qualitative inquiries into how people experience their lives and the circumstances and situations they face. Some work, for instance in various forms of discourse analysis, will also look for larger patterns, and while some of it might be quantitative, much of it is qualitative and interpretative in character as well.

² The first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1976/1998) is a good starting-point.

³ For instance, Ásta (2018) engaging with Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler when discussing sex and gender.

Interpretative work will still involve using various analytical tools in organizing a material and (hopefully) casting light on aspects of it, teasing out strands of meaning that might not have been immediately obvious. This is a type of work that is rarely (if ever) about trying to establish *the one authoritative reading* of something. While there might certainly be better or worse readings, part of the point is that laying out multiple meaningful readings will provide not just an enriched understanding of our objects of study. It can potentially also highlight how privileging some readings might in effect involve privileging certain specific perspectives or standpoints. This can then have political implications since different positions might already be societally privileged or underprivileged. If we wonder about what kind of philosophy that people working with qualitative or interpretative methods will find useful, it seems rather unlikely that they would get very far with theories in which human beings are understood as thinly characterized agents with just a few preferences between them (and where numerical values might then be assigned to a limited number of fixed outcomes). There is a need for theories and frameworks where human agency is also understood in terms of how we attach meaning to things, often struggling to make sense of things, and sometimes contesting established meanings. Our interactions with others are not just strategic (getting as much as we can of what we already want), but also formative: becoming the kinds of persons we are, coming to see certain things as desirable and others as not.

I suspect that most social ontologists do recognize that the social realm is often a messy and contested place. But at least in the past, this messiness is something that many theorists have tended to abstract away from. Doing so can facilitate certain kinds of theorizing, but at least if one wants to theorize in ways that might be more broadly useful, it is far from clear that standard forms of social ontology will provide relevant tools for those doing qualitative studies and interpretative work. Social ontology is however becoming increasingly diverse. While it is difficult to say now exactly what things will look like in the future, one can certainly find recent works where care is taken to do justice to the messy and contested character of the social realm.⁴ In the last few years, some social ontologists have also become interested in questions about social indeterminacy, which potentially can be important in recognizing that many social matters are matters of interpretation.⁵

⁴ Jenkins (2023) is a good example here.

⁵ Or so I have argued (Brännmark, 2024). Other examples of works on social indeterminacy are Richardson (2024) and Rust (2021).

4. THE CENTRALITY OF POWER

While there are certainly exceptions, analytic social ontologists have been relatively uninterested in the notion of *power*. Again, social ontology is not unique here. Analytic philosophy in general has largely left questions about power to the side. And even when power is part of what is being analyzed by social ontologists, power relations are often understood primarily as something that is the *product* of certain social or institutional facts having already been established.⁶ In contrast, many social scientists emphasize the productive dimension of power, where what society looks like now depends on complex historical processes infused with power dynamics.

Of course, if one looks at different disciplines in the social sciences, it certainly varies how much attention that is paid to matters of power: it varies between them and it varies within them. But power is often a central notion. Interestingly enough, one discipline where power, at least from what I can tell, has a much more marginal place is economics, i.e., the social science with which social ontology has traditionally had the most overlap. There is certainly important work being done in that overlap, partly facilitated by the availability of shared tools like game theory, but if one is interested in creating more overlaps and with other disciplines, then other tools are surely needed. And for many social scientists, an inattentiveness to power is likely to appear peculiar—how can one theorize the social realm and not see power as a key ingredient? For example, many social ontologists and economists tend to treat preferences as *exogenous* factors in their modelling. One is then looking at what would happen *given* that people have these or those preferences, but does not try to explain or understand the preferences we have. However illuminating such models might be in certain respects, they will always be incomplete. Especially if one is interested in the productive dimension of power, one will need to go into questions of preference formation, as well as questions about identity formation: how do we become who we are?

Again, we have a contrast with so-called “continental philosophy” here. As already noted, there are enormous differences within that category (as well as differences in what different people use the label for). But the label as such is uninteresting. Much of Marxism and critical theory differ quite a bit

⁶ For instance, while Searle (2010, ch. 7) does provide some brief and sketchy discussions of *Foucauldian biopower* and so-called *Background power*, he still eventually ends up focusing on power understood in terms of status functions and the possession of deontic power (i.e., something that presupposes collective acceptance being in place), and with little to no attention being paid to actual historical processes and how these have shaped what dominant ideas that are now in place.

from post-structuralist and post-humanist theorizing, and postcolonial and decolonial approaches importantly take us beyond the focus on French and German thinkers that one otherwise too often ends up with when thinking about non-analytic philosophy. But one thing that these different approaches have in common is a strong focus on the workings of power. So it is hardly surprising that many social scientists turn to these kinds of theories rather than what analytic philosophy has tended to deliver. There does however not appear to be anything specific about social ontology done in an analytic vein that stands in the way of theorizing power more fully. It seems more like a historical accident that we ended up with this as a lower priority.

Things have also already started to change somewhat. Philosophers doing non-ideal or critical social ontology are typically much more oriented towards understanding the workings of power.⁷ One recent example, Burman (2023), very clearly positions power as a central notion, and provides a taxonomy of different types of power. Still, compared to how sophisticated our understanding of different forms of collective intentionality has become by now, it seems reasonable to think that we are still very much in the early stages of this kind of work, and that much remains to be done. Little can be known in advance about just how useful such inquiries will be to researchers in other disciplines, but largely ignoring a central notion like power seems like a recipe for being largely ignored.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Addressing questions about what social ontology is and what we want it to be, or maybe *should* want it to be, is obviously far from uncomplicated. It is not even clear that there is a relevant *we* who faces these questions, at least not in anything but a very loose sense. In identifying three (partly interrelated) moves that one might undertake as a social ontologist, I have also not wanted to suggest that everyone should immediately run in one direction. For largely historical reasons, social ontology has arguably been unnecessarily narrowed-down as a field, with much to be gained from taking a more pluralistic and ecumenical approach. But the point is not that work that has been done in the past is bad or unimportant—on the contrary, it has yielded important insights. It is just that there is so much more ground left to explore. For social ontology as a field, the above suggestions are accordingly not so much about a problematic past, but an exciting future.

⁷ Having previously argued for non-ideal social ontology (Brännmark, 2019), I am admittedly already committed to seeing some promise here.

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