

How Essentialism Properly Understood Might Reconcile Realism and Social Constructivism

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1 Introduction

This paper is intended to be about social ontology. There are indeed many specific problems about social ontology, as revealed in the relevant literature, that are most fascinating and that may be independent from foundational ontological issues. However, my fear is that unclarities about ontology in general radiate to social ontology, and therefore I want to start with ontology in general.

But it is not only this fear that drives me. It is also the hunch that no little interest in social ontology derives from a fundamental ontological divide. There is realism claiming that reality is basically mind-independent, and there are various brands of idealism or (social) constructivism united in the claim that reality is basically mind-dependent. Certainly, the first question then is what mind-dependence could mean here. In any case, it may seem that the two opposites meet in social ontology; that is, it may seem that mind-dependence might hold for social ontology and mind-independence otherwise, so that each side is right halfway.

It is also for this reason that I first turn to ontology in general. And I will also end up concluding that realism and social constructivism are both right halfway. However not in the way just envisaged, but rather concerning ontology *tout court*. This will still have interesting implications for social ontology, as I will briefly explain at the end of the paper. In the main, though, I will discuss general ontology.

Let me first flesh out a bit the basic opposition. Realism is the NOA, the natural ontological attitude.¹ There are some things, cars, for instance, and other artifacts,

¹If I may say so, in order to recapture “NOA” from its displaced usage by Fine (1984). However, I won’t discuss here the fine distinction between everyday and scientific realism.

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which we have made and which thus depend on our minds, in a clear sense. However, most things, stars and stones, trees and bees, numbers and sets are what they are, without us adding anything to them; they would just be so, even if we and our minds didn't exist.

However, we know well enough how idealism creeps in with Berkeley. For Kant, things as appearances, the only objects about which we can know anything, are the product of a synthesis of intuitions. Synthesis is something performed by a subject. Still, it is objective for Kant insofar as it is done by the unique transcendental subject. However, as soon as you give up on that, you end up with each of many empirical subjects performing their own syntheses (in Kantian terms) and thus with the idea of social constructivism that ontology, i.e., which objects exist, depends on our individual and social constructions. Similarly, phenomenologists speak of the constitution of objects as something done by us.²

Quine (1960), to mention just one further prominent position, certainly belongs to neither group. However, his realism is shallow, since he only accepts redundant inner-theoretical truth and rejects any trans-theoretical perspective. We speak of the objects of which we speak; and our ontology is determined by our language/theory, which we impose per fiat on foreign linguistic communities, because their ontologies are inscrutable, anyway.

To put the issue in still other terms: There is the common saying that we carve up the world at its joints. But it has two different emphases: there is the realist emphasis that there *is* the world with its joints and we attempt to carve it up there; and there is the constructivist emphasis that *we* carve up the world and the joints are where we carve.

So, how are we to understand or to integrate the natural realism and the constructivist temptation by which many have been seduced? This is the issue I want to address.

2 What Is an Object?

The only way I see for proceeding on this issue is to start right at the beginning, at the fundamental ontological question: What at all is an object? What a question! What may count as an answer is pointed at by the old dictum: no entity without identity. So, we have to look for the identity conditions of objects. In principle, the answer is given by Leibniz' principle, which I prefer to express in a negative way (because of the awkwardness of identity sentences):

a numerically differs from *b* if and only if there is a property which *a* has and *b* lacks.

²I am deliberately speaking here in a general way. Any specific reference would stir up a hornets' nest of subtly distinct positions, which can only be misrepresented by short statements. However, Devitt (1991) is still a beautiful representation (and criticism) of various forms of non-realism.

This contains both, the unproblematic indiscernibility of identicals as well as the problematic identity of indiscernibles. The “if and only if” ensures that the principle indeed delivers identity conditions.

The problem with Leibniz’ principle is the quantification over properties. Which properties, precisely, are intended here? Does anything expressed by an extensional formula with one free variable count as a property? Then the principle is trivially true. May the free variable occur in intensional contexts of the formula? Then the principle is either trivially false, or one can claim difficulties with interpreting such formulae. Does identity with a count as a property? Then, again, the principle is trivially true. Are only non-relational qualitative properties quantified over? Then the principle is trivially false. In any case, the answer seems trivial. Is there a way to turn Leibniz’ principle into a true *and* substantial principle?

Yes, I think so. Let us call a property *proper* if it does in no way refer to identity, i.e., if it may expressed by some formula with one free variable and without identity. Thus, proper properties may be relational or non-relational. Restricting Leibniz’ principle to proper properties does not yet help, though. Then it is still trivial. For instance, different concrete objects presumably must occupy different places, it seems, at least at some time (and/or in some possible world).

In this context, the crucial notion certainly is that of an essential property: F is an *essential property of a* if and only if a cannot fail to have F , if a cannot exist without F , i.e., if a has F in each possible world in which it exists, and thus if every possible object which is not F cannot be a . It is precisely the ancient or medieval notion of necessity *de re* or metaphysical necessity, rejected by the logical empiricists and also by Quine and recovered by Kripke (1972) and others, which is invoked here. There are improper essential properties like being self-identical, which applies to everything, or like being identical to a , which applies only to a . And there are proper ones; for instance, being human is essential for me.

It is important that essentiality is a relation: a property is essential *for* an object. One may call a property *essential simpliciter* if each object has or lacks it essentially. Thus, being human is also an essential property simpliciter; nothing is only contingently human. However, when I speak of essential properties in the sequel, I don’t speak of the latter; I will rather be sloppily referring to the relational usage.

A crucial observation is that there also are relational essential properties. I am essentially the son of my parents (and thus the grandson of my grandparents, and so on). Someone could be very much like me, even in extreme degrees; if he is not the son of my parents, he could not be me. Thus, I ontologically depend on my parents in the precise sense that I could not exist without them; in any world in which I exist my parents must exist as well, but not vice versa. Likewise, the number 2 is essentially smaller than 3, the root of 4, etc.

If F is applicable to a , but not an essential property of a , then F is *contingent* or *accidental* for a . This means that a may or may not have F . Being now here is contingent for me, and having me as a son is an accidental relational property of my parents. The number 2, by contrast, has no contingent properties, at least within its home field of arithmetical properties and relations. It belongs to the realm of necessity.

Let us call the conjunction of all essential properties of *a* the *essence* of *a*. Then, essences can be qualified as proper, non-relational, etc., just as the properties themselves. For instance, the *proper essence* of *a* is the conjunction of all proper essential properties of *a*. Then I think the appropriate, i.e., a true and substantial version of Leibniz' principle is this:

a numerically differs from *b* if and only if their proper essences (including their relational essences) differ, i.e., if there is a proper property which *a* has and *b* lacks essentially.

So, the substantial claim is the form the identity of indiscernibles thereby takes, namely that objects have no haecceities transcending their proper essence. Surely, this version of Leibniz' principle is contested, and there is a long-standing debate about this. I am not starting to defend it and simply presuppose it for the rest of this paper.

However, it looks at least plausible. I am essentially the unique human offspring of that egg of my mother and that sperm of my father. In my view, this includes that I essentially have no monozygotic twin. If that fertilized egg would have divided in two, I would have been none of those twins; and so it would be with other (symmetric) fissions.³ Thus, among all possible objects, I am thereby uniquely characterized. Similarly, the number 2 essentially has its position in the progression of natural numbers; this characterizes it uniquely and entails all of its other essential properties. I am unsure how seriously one should take alleged counter-examples such as in Leitgeb and Ladyman (2008).

This principle entails that our talk of objects and identity is inseparably bound up with metaphysical necessity; objectual talk is modal talk right from the start. Therefore I think, by the way, that animals don't have our notion of an object. Animals have remarkable ways of identifying objects, and these ways have become ever more reliable and sophisticated in evolutionary history. Still, they can be tricked. We may also be tricked, even with our superior means of identification. The difference is that we have a standard of numerical identity, our distinction between essential and accidental properties, by which we could tell in principle, or from the God's eye view, whether we are tricked. I don't see how animals could do the same, how they could have the same distinction and thus the notion of an object and of identity.

3 The Distinction Between Essential and Accidental Properties

This remark leads me to the next important question: where does this distinction come from? I think, the only good answer leads us right to the core truth of social constructivism: It is *we* who impose this distinction on nature, metaphysical

³This view is contested, of course. See, e.g., Lowe (2002, Part I).

necessity is our invention and convention, and since this is bound up with identity and objecthood, it is *we* who constitute objects.

We have to work a little bit in order to understand this properly and to understand in particular why our natural realism is in no way compromised by this answer. Moreover, we shall see later on that this constructivist claim is only half true; there remains space for discovering metaphysical necessity even after our imposition. However, this amendment can only be introduced after elucidating the crude constructivist claim.

Before these elucidations, let me relate this claim to the previous section. I motivated attending the essential/accidental distinction by the essentialist version of Leibniz' principle. However, this distinction is independent from the principle; we may well accept the distinction, as we should in any case, while doubting this version of Leibniz' principle. So, the constructivist claim does not rely on this principle. However, it is only via this principle, via the dependence of ontology or objecthood on this distinction, that this claim entails the stronger claim that *we* construct our ontology in some sense. And it is this stronger claim in which we are ultimately interested.⁴

Let me provide some reasons for the claim above, a positive and a negative one. The negative reason is that I don't see how we could simply discover essential properties in reality. We can find out that something is human, or square; but how do we find out that it is essentially human, or essentially square? This does not seem to be the kind of property to be empirically discovered. However, if nature does not provide the distinction between essential and accidental properties, where does it come from? There remains only one option: Somehow, the distinction is built in into the way we conceive of the world; we add it to the world.

This nicely fits to a general conception of modality. One may take (some) modal facts as brute facts, thus fending off further explanatory demands. However, if one does not want to acquiesce in these mysterious brute facts, then one might either go with Lewis (1986a, pp. ix ff) for Humean supervenience, according to which all modal facts supervene on non-modal facts. Or one might go with Blackburn (1993) for Humean projection, according to which natural modalities like nomic and causal necessity somehow are projections or objectivizations of our subjective propositional attitudes. This would be my preference.⁵ And the human origin of the essential/accidental distinction is well in line with the latter conception.

There is also a positive reason. It is that we can simply impose this distinction and thereby constitute new objects. This is no mystery; we, or at least we philosophers, do it all the time. Quine (1960, ch. II) invented rabbit stages. A rabbit stage essentially consists of a certain rabbit; different rabbits, different stages. And it essentially exists at a certain time; it cannot exist earlier or later; and again, different

⁴Thanks to Wlodek Rabinowicz for pointing out this clarification to me.

⁵For a constructive explication of the metaphor of projection with regard to nomic and causal necessity see Spohn (2012, chs. 12, 14, and 15).

times, different stages. So, Quine constituted novel objects by taking their time of existence to be essential for them. By contrast, the temporal extension of rabbits and other familiar concrete things is contingent.

Similarly, some philosophers (e.g., Davidson 1985) say that an event is individuated by, or essentially is, a certain spatiotemporal region (plus its intrinsic content). While it may be dubious whether these are events in the ordinary sense and whether events should be conceived in a less fragile way (cf. Lewis 1986a, ch. 23), it is very clear how events in this strict sense are constituted and hence what they are. These examples demonstrate my point: obviously, we can create, as it were, objects simply by specifying their supposed proper essence. Well, creation is a causal notion and hence inappropriate. We better speak of constitution or individuation, which is not a causal process.

This observation is crucial for preserving our realist sense. The objects thus constituted are mind-independent; they do not depend on us or on our minds in any causal or counterfactual way. The earth and its continents would exist and be as they are, even if unconstituted, even if there would be nobody around to constitute them. Although we can tell what an object is only if we have constituted it, its being constituted by us is not essential to it. Otherwise, all objects would have to wait for our constitution in order to come into existence – clearly an absurd idea. No, if being constituted by us is a property of objects, it is a contingent one.

We must carefully distinguish here between constitutability and actual constitution. Every possible object must be constitutable or individuable; every possible object is distinguished by its essential properties. This is what our version of Leibniz' principle requires. If there were something the individuating essential properties of which cannot be specified, it would be unclear what *it* is; it would already be illegitimate to speak of *something* here.

Among all these constitutable possible objects there are some actual objects, i.e., those existing in, or inhabiting, the actual world. However, even most of the actual objects remain unconstituted. There are rabbit stages, since there are rabbits. However, even though rabbits and rabbit stages exist for many millions of years and even though we talk of rabbits for thousands of years, it was only Quine who had the crazy idea to constitute rabbit stages and to talk of them. That is, if we think or speak of objects, they first have to be constituted or individuated; only then it is determinate what we think and speak of.

So, our ontology, what we think and speak about, depends on what we happen to constitute. However, what actually exists by far exceeds our ontology in this sense; it comprises also all of the actual, constitutable, but unconstituted objects. What actually exists depends only on the actual world; and it is the same for communities with diverging ontologies. There may be difficulties in mutually translating languages with diverging ontological schemes; but insofar the ontologies consist of actual existences, both are right. Such communities live in their own world only in a metaphorical sense; it is only their *mental* worlds that differ. And finally, what actually exists is only a tiny part of what possibly exists, of the class of all possible, constitutable objects.

In a way, all of this reduces to a platitude: we think and speak only of the objects of which we happen to think and speak; of course, this depends on us. And then there also are many objects of which we don't think and speak. What I have added to this platitude is merely that thinking and speaking of an object presupposes constituting or individuating it; and that this is something we have to do as well.

I just said that there are many constitutable, though unconstituted objects. What are the rules of constitutability? There is no unconstrained liberty. We certainly cannot take, as Meinong roughly did, any consistent or even inconsistent set of properties and declare the existence of a possible object having precisely that set as its essence (cf. Parsons 1980 for a formal account of such views). What is more plausible is that for any co-instantiable set of properties, i.e., for which there is a possible object having them, there is a further object having those properties essentially. An elaborate theory of essentialism and of possible objects would have to specify these rules of constitutability; to my knowledge they are (much too) little investigated. However, this is not our present task.

Actual constitution seems to be a lot of work; after all, we think and speak of very many objects. Of course, it is not. It is not individual work. It is even not contemporary social work, although we may change and enrich our ontology here and there. Mainly, we inherit our ontology from our ancestors by growing into their language and its ontological scheme. However, this should not blind us for the fact that our ontology, the kinds of objects we constitute, is part of our linguistic conventions. Even if we take over the conventions of our ancestors, they remain conventions. Therefore I like to speak of *essentiality conventions* which govern our ontology, our constitution of objects.⁶

Conventions: this sounds so arbitrary, as if we could constitute any ontology we like. Yes, to a large extent we do; this is what I wanted to convey. However, this is not to exclude that there are silly and useful, good and bad conventions. It would be most important and fascinating to explore the rationality behind our ontological or essentialistic conventions. Why do we have the conventions we have? Why, for instance, are we used to constitute persistent things and not stages? And why do we constitute those persistent things as enduring and not as perduring?⁷ And so forth. I am not aware of deep investigations couched in these terms. Maybe good answers are given under different headings; maybe the rationality lies in somehow maximizing contingency and hence, since explanations refer only to contingent facts, in somehow maximizing our explanatory reach. In any case, that's my point, we do not find an answer by staring at nature and searching for essences there. We rather must look at ourselves and study our ontological policies.

⁶I take this term from Haas-Spohn (1995, sect. 3.5), where it is introduced and discussed in detail.

⁷The distinction of perdurance vs. endurance of persisting objects is due to Lewis (1986b, pp. 99 and 202ff). The presupposition of my question, that we have an ontology of enduring objects, is a big claim contra Lewis, which I am not going to defend here.

4 Putnam's Insight

Matters are still more complicated. So far, I have contended that we declare which of the properties are essential and which are accidental for objects and that we thereby constitute those objects. But this is not quite what we do. Usually, we only say what *kind* of property is essential for an object and leave it open to empirical inquiry which essential property of that kind the object actually has. This then is an inquiry into the essence of that object. In this way, the essentiality conventions only partially fix the essences of objects; within these bounds, the full determination is taken over by nature itself.

For instance, we declare that, if I am human, I am essentially human. But what that is to be human is unknown and open to investigation. Similarly, we say that I have my parents essentially. This leaves the business to you to find out who my parents are (in which you will only succeed by finding out who my grandparents are, and so on; that is, you will never finish the business).

In principle, this point is clear, since Kripke (1972) explained to us that some metaphysical necessities are a posteriori. However, I prefer to call the point Putnam's insight, because Putnam (1975) argued in a particularly forceful way that a natural kind term essentially applies to objects which stand in an unknown theoretical equality relation to supposed paradigms of that natural kind. For instance, water is what stands in the same-liquid relation to most of our water paradigms; and both is up to empirical and theoretical inquiry, the same-liquid relation and the actual nature of our water paradigms. (*Some* of our water paradigms may turn out not to be water; but there is no standard of comparison on the basis of which it could turn out that most of our water paradigms are not water.) And Putnam (1975, pp. 235ff – his example is “gold”) made also very clear that it is our convention to treat terms like “water” as natural kind terms. We could also use “water” as a term essentially applying to anything that has the same superficial characteristics as our paradigms, such as being fluid, colorless, and tasteless. But this would be a different usage. Thus, the convention is to use “water” as a natural kind term, and the precise nature of the natural kind of water is up to discovery.

This allows for the possibility that we do not find any underlying nature. Any natural kind term comes along with a hierarchy of fallback positions governing our responses to unexpected discoveries. If we find only chaos underneath the surface, we might even end up with taking the essence of water to lie in its superficial characteristics; but this would then be the result of investigations, not a conventional ruling right from the start.

These remarks extend to objects. If I am essentially human and if being human is a natural kind, then there is something to find out about my nature. Moreover, if my origin, i.e., my parents are essential to me, this also fixes only a kind of relational property essential to me; and it still leaves the task of finding out who my parents are.

So, Putnam's insight leaves the fact untouched that our usage is governed by essentiality conventions, and this fact is quite explicit in Putnam's work. Emphasizing the insight might have obscured the fact about conventions. Both points are

important, and this is why I have introduced the insight only after arguing for the human origin of the essential/accidental distinction. Still, the insight shifts, in a way, the weights between realism and constructivism in favor of the former, though only to an extent admitted by the latter. And the point puts the above issue about the rationality of our essentiality conventions into a new light. Apparently, it is often reasonable to delegate the fixation of essences to nature within conventional bounds.

Let me summarize: I argued that the distinction between essential and accidental properties and hence the constitution of objects is due to the essentiality conventions of our linguistic community. There is this much truth in social constructivism. In this sense we construct the world. However, this phrase is dangerous and misleading. Construction must not be given any causal meaning here. The world, at least the natural world, and its objects would exist in the very same way, even if our constructions were different or non-existent. Different constructions would speak about different objects; but this does not mean that the unspoken objects do not exist and are not what they are.

The situation is nicely highlighted by the catch question attributed to Abraham Lincoln: how many legs would a monkey have, if we would also call its tail a leg? The right answer is, of course: still 4, not 5. We don't change the world by speaking differently about it. So, despite the social constitution of objects we may stick to our natural realism – all the more as the essence of objects very often is as it is and waiting to be discovered, within the bounds established by our conventions.

5 Consequences for Social Ontology

What does all of this entail for social ontology? The negative conclusion is that social ontology does not provide the special arena in which realism and social constructivism would meet, as I have envisaged in the introduction of this paper. They meet in the general arena in the way indicated.

The positive conclusion is that the general ontological observations apply to social ontology as well. However, this is not to say that social ontology would not have its peculiarities. On the contrary, there are at least two striking differences.

The first difference is that the social world is indeed constructed by us in the ordinary sense. All the objects belonging to it are causally and indeed ontologically dependent on us; they would and could not exist as what they are without us. And they are many: all the artifacts, houses, furniture, clothes, cars, books, banknotes, etc.; our environment is overcrowded by artifacts. An artifact belongs to its kind essentially, like an animal or a plant it has its origin essentially, and thus it has a unique essence. (Since we made the artifacts, we more easily slip into the quandaries of fission, fusion, gradual substitution (as in Theseus' ship), etc. However, they pose problems for everyone, not only for essentialism.)

In principle, the same applies to more abstract social objects, political institutions, nations, social formations, religions, economic organizations, etc. In those areas we find many examples where conceptualizations not only represent, but

indeed make the world, as the social constructivist claims. However, they make the world not in the sense of Goodman (1978), which he extends from the cultural to the natural world and which I find obscure, but rather in the sense of Searle (2010), which I do not find obscure and which basically seems to me to be the ordinary causal sense.⁸ These effects may even reach deeply into individual psychology. We may well grant that the mental states and attitudes, even the feelings we actually have are deeply imprinted by how we conventionally conceptualize them. And this is definitely responsible for a lot of foreignness across times, societies, and cultures. In any case, in all these areas there is a lot of our own making.

The second difference we find in social ontology lies in the kind of essential properties. I mentioned that the origin of an artifact is part of its essence; this is no peculiarity. However, we must also say to which kind it essentially belongs; otherwise we don't know which object came into existence at its origin. Here we find a difference; in nature we usually constitute natural kinds, whereas in culture we very often constitute functional kinds. At least this applies to all the kinds of artifacts I have mentioned above.

And it applies to more abstract social entities like money, property, taxes, economic and political institutions and offices, social roles, etc. Let me quote from Weidmann (2012), from the current president of the German Federal Reserve; he says: "Money is defined by its functions. . . . Money is a social convention." Searle (2010, ch. 5) says that all those entities derive their existence from our status function declarations and thus from our declarative speech acts. In any case, they have those functions essentially.

This entails that the essences of the objects of our social world are usually not hidden and unknown. Well, this is not quite true; the origin of a particular artifact is often unknown and of no further interest. But it is true of the kinds. Their function is common knowledge; hence we know their essences and thus the kinds themselves. There is no hidden nature of chairs or cars or checks or chancellors.

We may describe this point in a different way. In Spohn (2012, sect. 16.4) I defended the view that an individual person is conscious of precisely those facts that are ipso facto known to her, such as her being in pain, her presently thinking of her son, her believing that Berlin is the capital of Germany, her desiring to make vacations, etc. This characterization allows to extend the notion of consciousness to collective subjects. That is, in precisely this sense, one can say that the social consciousness of a community consists in its common knowledge, because it is precisely common knowledge that is known to be common knowledge. In this sense, one can also say that social ontology is part of social consciousness.

However, this applies only to objects and entities in our own community where we may assume common knowledge of them. In principle, though, what I have called Putnam's insight is relevant also in the social realm. If we visit foreign cultures, we clearly find objects that apparently have some function, though we don't know which; and the most evasive of those objects are linguistic signs. In this

⁸See also Devitt (1991, sect. 13.5). I entirely agree with his criticism of Goodman.

case, the foreigners could show and try to tell us the function; this might include teaching us their language. Then our ignorance is relieved. However, matters are not so simple, for instance, when we find strange things in the tombs of our ancestors, where nobody can give us any explanations. And matters are still harder with more abstract social entities like roles and institutions. What they might have been in illiterate foreign cultures is almost impossible to find out, and even with literate societies it is often difficult, since their signs and languages are social entities themselves and hard to access.

Let it suffice with these remarks on social ontology. They are neither systematic nor particularly revealing. Their only point was to briefly indicate how social ontology falls under general ontology in its specific ways. The main point I wanted to make is how even general ontology is socially determined, as social constructivists might have it, though without thereby undermining our natural realistic attitude in any way.

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