

How is Social Ontology Possible?

Reflections on the Nature of Social Ontology and its Relation to the Natural – and the Social Sciences

The scrutiny to which contemporary philosophical analysis subjects our understanding of the social world is customarily couched in terms of social ontological inquiries into a social reality whose foundations social ontology aspires to expose, or at the least, to imply or suggest. As our main concern is with social reality, consisting centrally of societies and human institutions, we may, in an attempt to elucidate the large and intersecting research terrain opened up by Social Ontology, offer the following dissection of the components of this field of study: (i) *The subject* of Social Ontology forming the subject matter and philosophical curriculum enjoying a specified epistemological task and status, (ii) *the object* of inquiry, social reality, consisting of social objects, institutions, processes and phenomena, and their relations to the individuals occupying them, (iii) *the kind of interest and focus* the subject of Ontology takes in the object of study, i.e. the attempt at exposing and embroidering the ontological constitution and structure of the aspects and entities of social reality, and (iv) the ontological *investigation of particular objects*, social entities and phenomena, that make up social reality *given* an understanding of the research endeavor (i-iii). In ontological investigations into a particular social entity, e.g. a political community, we may thus approach it as an object whose foundations we direct our attention toward and wish to explain or depict in terms of presenting an account of its status, type and mode of existence, characteristically by focusing on the formation and build-up of the object, i.e. the collective intentions, or otherwise, constitutive of the community.

The purpose of our paper is to reflect on the subject of Social Ontology as a philosophical program - on the philosophy of Social Ontology *per se*. By contrast with focusing on and aiming at the presentation and assessment of alternative accounts of the general nature of social reality or particular social objects, entities or phenomena, we undertake an elaboration of the *logical relations* prevailing between (i) - (iv) as they emerge against *different* basic conceptions of the epistemological role and status of Social Ontology. Turning the reflective focus toward alternative determinations of the subject field and the analytical task itself, allows us to inquire how contesting accounts of the general nature of social reality (ii) and particular objects (iv), such as collective entities of sorts, may be related to and reflective of different conceptions of the nature, status and ultimate ambition of Social Ontology. We explore the possibility that *what* the problem and task – or “first” question – of Social Ontology is taken to be, and *how* and *in which terms* the basic problem addressed by it is thought to emerge (i, iii) become mirrored in the contesting accounts given of both social reality in general (ii) and particular social objects (iv). In so doing, we ask if there can be an identification and understanding of the general nature of social reality (ii) apart from being in possession of an understanding of particulars of this instance of reality; which is to open up the crucial corollary question *on what basis* the explorations of foundations of social reality are carried out. In as far as the components (i) - (iv) of social ontological studies exhibit relations of *internal* influence, co-variance or logical dependency, we entertain the suggestion that our understanding of Social Ontology might gain significantly by letting itself become more informed by the teachings of various “socio-substantive accounts” of particular social objects; and conversely, that the accounts of such particulars may do well to be less informed by general *anterior* philosophies and over-arching philosophical commitments of which different conceptions of Social Ontology can be seen to form a part.

Our study will therefore proceed with an explication of different conceptions of Social Ontology (i) by way of bringing out various general philosophical outlooks that they may interact with. Expanding into the terrain of general philosophies that imply an epistemological place and status for Social Ontology, shows how alternative conceptions of the character of Ontology (i) and of social reality (ii) may be related or intertwined. Two general philosophical traditions that play significant roles in contending definitions of Ontology (i) and social reality (ii) are identified and explored. One makes the concept of an independent reality epistemologically central and basic; the other assigns this role to language. Regarding the former group of philosophies, we will pay particular heed to conceptions that work with a dualist distinction between a reality, and its appearance to us, in which the relation between language and reality is configured to the effect that language is paradigmatically taken to refer to or describe, or failing to refer to or describe, a reality apart from it. This is what gives the use of language its point, on which its meaningfulness depends, and in a strong adaptation what is presupposed by it. As for the latter cluster of philosophies, we will concentrate on the notion that instead of being (or failing to be) determined by reality, language is to be seen as constitutive of it, i.e. of different conceptions of reality. Parallel to this divide, can run the contention that social entities and phenomena are expressive of an underlying reality enjoying some autonomy in relation to language; for example, the notion that collectives such as political communities manifest either primate human behavior, reactions, and attitude-dispositions, or pre-set idealistic determinations available to human cognition and rationality - both of which form of autonomous reality foregoes, brings about or settles the sense of the concept of community. This imagery naturally suggests a final explanatory task for the natural sciences or for a social science/philosophy that is, or approximates to, the epistemological order and model of the former. In a version of making language constitutive of reality standing in diametrical opposition to this edition of realism, it is categorically denied that these entities are anything but the creation of contingent, changing and arbitrary uses of language, e.g. "national narratives" as against a background of foundational, logically basic shapelessness. Contrary to its opposite number, it is maintained these behavioral or inferential schemes presuppose language, the basic explanatory, which suggests the social sciences demonstrate a certain autonomy and logical distinctness with respect to for example empirically demonstrable patterns of conduct, since the patterns are relevantly outcomes of certain language-uses preceding and governing them.

Our main contentions involve that the different contesting analyses of various particular objects studied (iv) are in fact in many cases conditioned, affected or colored by (prior) conceptions of the general nature of Social Ontology and its object (i-ii) to a degree raising some intriguing issues that become intricate as the explanatory ambitions are raised. This is not to say the logical distance between initial methodological or general philosophical stipulations (i-iii) and results (iv) typically narrows down to theory-internal vicious circularity, but rather that we face and need to address at once penetrating and comprehensive questions pertaining to the general relation between theory and practice, e.g. the status and role of general philosophies, stipulations and ways of proceeding on the one hand, and actual practices and uses of language held to on the other. Nor is it to say there cannot be a conception of the ontological enterprise that steers clear of the issues: indeed, we look forward to presenting one.