

Realism and Antirealism¹

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Introduction

Our best social scientific theories try to tell us something about the social world. But is talk of a “social world” a metaphor that we ought not take too seriously? In particular, do the denizens of the social world—cultural values like the Protestant work ethic, firms like ExxonMobil, norms like standards of dress and behavior, institutions like the legal system, teams like FC Barcelona, conventions like marriages—exist? The question is not merely academic. Social scientists use these different social entities to explain social phenomena such as the rise of capitalism, the decline in oil prices, or the effect of unions on the sports labor market. But how could these explanations possibly work if social entities don’t exist?

Questions about the existence of social entities have implications for both philosophical and social-scientific inquiry. A central area of philosophy is ontology—the study of what exists. Social ontology is a relatively new field, and enriches older ontological debates with novel questions and broader concerns. But the realism debate is not exclusively (or even primarily) about ontology; rather, there is an intimate link between these ontological questions and epistemological concerns about how social-scientific explanations should proceed. For instance, whether social entities exist determines the extent to which these explanations should emulate their natural-scientific counterparts. Similar considerations determine the extent to which these explanations must appeal to individual actions.

To navigate this intellectual landscape, let’s introduce a distinction. A *realist* is anyone who believes that social scientists are warranted in believing that social entities exist; an *antirealist* is anybody who disagrees. Different antirealists disagree with realists for different reasons. Consequently, we canvass five kinds of antirealism below: explanatory pessimism, fictionalism, eliminativism, reductionism, and constructivism.

Debates about realism in the social sciences tend to cluster into one of three categories. First, should we be realists about the theoretical entities appealed to in our best social-scientific theories? These debates parallel their counterparts in the philosophy of natural science. Realists in the natural sciences argue that the predictive, experimental, and technological success of natural-scientific explanations warrants belief in entities such as quarks and gravity. Similarly, our most empirically successful explanations of poverty, for example, invoke social strata, social structures, and economic policies. If such entities are necessary features of our best explanations, does that entail that we should be realists about such entities? Realists argue that the best way to account for the explanatory success of our social scientific theories is by being realists about the entities posited in our theories; anti-realists deny this claim.

Second are questions about whether we should be realists about *groups*, where we can understand groups roughly as a collection of individuals organized with some collective interest, goal, or characteristic. Groups can range from micro-groups consisting of a few individuals, to meso-groups such as corporations, all the way up to macro-groups such as nations. Realists about groups believe that groups cannot be reduced to mere collections of individuals; antirealists about groups think

that groups can be explained without remainder in terms of the individuals who constitute the group.

Third are questions about whether we should be realists about *the things that groups create*. Entities such as money, laws, race, and gender are “socially constructed,” in the sense that their most important properties depend on how we conceive of them. By contrast, natural properties—the charge of electrons, the height of mountains, and the atomic weight of chemical elements, for instance—are independent of how we conceive of them. We might wonder, then, whether the fact that groups create social entities means that they are not real. Realists about socially constructed entities (such as money or race) argue that these entities could not function in our lives and in the world without being real; antirealists about socially constructed entities argue the contrary. In what follows, we look at these three realist debates, canvassing arguments both for and against realist and antirealist positions.

1. Should we believe what social science tells us?

Social scientists are scientists. As such, they advance theories with the aim of predicting, explaining, and controlling some part of the world. Let us say that theories that fulfill these aims are *empirically successful*. A theory’s empirical success is the most compelling reason to believe that it is (mostly) true. If these slogans about science are correct, then, to the extent that a social-scientific theory succeeds in predicting, explaining, and controlling some part of the social world, we should be realists about the social entities that it posits. In what follows, we develop this line of thought by discussing the central argument used to vindicate the reality of scientific entities. We then rehearse two prominent objections to that argument.

1.1. The Explanatory Argument

A powerful argument for realism is that the staggering level of empirical success of modern science would be nothing short of a miracle if its theories were radically false. For this reason, many philosophers and scientists are realists about subatomic particles, curved space-time, cells, species, natural selection, continental plates, and so on. The central idea is that realism provides the best (if not the only) explanation of the relevant aspects of the domain. Indeed, realists about many other entities (mathematical objects, moral truths, etc.) invoke this same principle to defend their positions. This suggests the following “Explanatory Argument” for realism about social entities:

EA1. If the best explanation of the relevant facts posits social entities, then we should believe that social entities exist.

EA2. The best explanation of the relevant facts posits social entities.

EA3. Therefore, we should believe that social entities exist.

A few clarifications are in order. First, the conclusion (EA3) amounts to realism about social entities. Second, an explanation *posits* an entity just in case that entity exists if the explanation is true. The *relevant* facts are typically those that most parties to a debate agree are in need of explanation. A hypothesis is the *best explanation* of a fact if it optimizes the set of criteria typically associated with our

best theories: simplicity, scope, fit with background knowledge, predictive power, and so on.

Indeed, with a little bit of reconstruction, we can see that social scientists frequently argue in this manner. This is particularly clear when we examine the extensive work on both qualitative (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994) and quantitative (Blalock 1971) causal inference in the social sciences. For instance, suppose that the chief cause of poverty is a federal policy that permits a very low minimum wage. Then that policy is the best explanation of poverty. Furthermore, this explanation assumes that policies have causal efficacy. However, non-existent things can't have causal efficacy. Consequently, policies exist.

What of non-causal explanations? Consider sociologists' observation that men born in lower socioeconomic strata have a higher chance of upward social mobility than those born in higher socioeconomic strata (Blau and Duncan 1967). Why is this? To appreciate the answer, consider Al, who is born at a lower socioeconomic stratum than Bob. If a socioeconomic stratum is higher than Bob's current stratum it is also higher than Al's, but not vice versa. Hence, there are more ways that Al can make an upward move. This explanation appears non-causal, as it only invokes probabilities that fall out of the "structure" of socioeconomic strata in the United States (Garfinkel 1981). Zooming back out to the larger philosophical picture, the best explanation of the observed correlations between social origins and social mobility posits social strata and social structures. According to the Explanatory Argument, this means that we should believe that social strata and social structures exist.

1.2. Explanatory Pessimism

While the Explanatory Argument nicely captures a prominent way in which philosophers and scientists (both social and natural) justify realism about theoretical posits, it has faced several objections. In particular, philosophers have questioned its first premise, i.e. that our best explanations are an effective guide to what exists. For ease of reference, we call anyone who raises this challenge an *explanatory pessimist*. Explanatorily pessimistic social scientists are somewhat rare, though they typically are motivated by empiricist concerns that we only can know correlations, but cannot have causal knowledge. Comte (1868) and Mill (1904) are early examples of this critical stance towards social explanation. Other authors criticize the reliability of certain kinds of explanations, e.g. functional explanations (Elster 2007), and hence might be interpreted as expressing qualified forms of explanatory pessimism.

By contrast, several natural scientists (and the philosophers who have studied their work) have argued that our best explanations are not a trustworthy guide to reality. For instance, Newtonian mechanics was the best explanation of many phenomena for nearly three centuries. However, the advent of Einsteinian and quantum mechanics in the early 20th century revealed that Newton's account was mistaken. Consequently, it would appear that the Explanatory Argument has given us bad advice: we should not have believed that Newtonian space, time, gravity, and energy exist.

Similar examples can be found in the social sciences. Consider Oscar Lewis' (1975) once-prominent explanation of poverty. Looking at five Mexican families with different socioeconomic outcomes, Lewis reasoned that the poorer families have a different value system (a "culture of poverty") than their more affluent counterparts, and that this value system prevents them from taking the measures needed to improve their socioeconomic status. As the explanation gained further corroboration, it had a good deal of prominence by the end of the 1970s, and figured prominently in policy decisions about social assistance. Hence, it was taken by many to be the best explanation of poverty. As such, the Explanatory Argument counsels us to believe in the existence of a culture of poverty.

Yet, throughout the 1980s, as finer-grained empirical measures of culture developed, and a wider variety of impoverished populations were studied, it became clear that the cultural variation among the poor was too great for this explanation to be true. As before, it would appear that the Explanatory Argument has given us bad advice: we should not have believed in the culture of poverty. Nor is this example an outlier; many explanations in the social sciences enjoy some notoriety, only to face searching empirical difficulties at a later date.

Antirealists use examples such as this to critique the Explanatory Argument. On one version, the so-called "Pessimistic Induction" (Laudan 1981), the best explanation at any given time is frequently rejected at a subsequent point in history. Consequently, we should not believe that our best explanations posit real entities, since they are likely to be replaced in the future. Hence, on this view, "best explanation" means "best for its time." On this formulation, Lewis' explanation was the best, posited a social entity (the culture of poverty), but we should not believe that this social entity exists. This falsifies the first premise of the Explanatory Argument.

Alternatively, and closely related, some antirealists argue that our explanation may only be the best of a bad lot, in which case, we should not believe that it posits real entities (Stanford 2006; van Fraassen 1989). This view can simply be a variant of the Pessimistic Induction. Alternatively, it may motivate skepticism about our ability to identify the best explanation, even if such an explanation justifies realism. On this view, the best explanation of poverty may posit a culture of poverty, but we cannot know that this explanation is better than the rest.

There are reasons to think that these objections to the Explanatory Argument are especially thorny in the philosophy of social science. For instance, many realists have responded to these pessimist challenges by claiming that our best explanations only entail belief in posits that are indispensable to novel predictions (Psillos 1999; Worrall 1989) or experimental interventions (Hacking 1983). Since these demanding kinds of empirical success are far less common in the social sciences than in the natural sciences, explanatory pessimism in the social sciences may be even more persuasive than its natural-scientific cousin. Having said this, some have suggested that social-scientific hypotheses also contain these high-grade posits (Kincaid 2008), and so realism about social entities is on par with realism about natural-scientific entities.

1.3. Fictionalism

Frequently, non-philosophers find these debates about realism to be “pointless” or “merely academic.” On such a view, it simply does not matter if social entities exist or not. There are more and less principled ways to make this point. A fairly sophisticated one comes from *fictionalists*. Like explanatory pessimists, fictionalists object to the first premise of the Explanatory Argument. However, whereas explanatory pessimists are largely concerned with showing why we cannot *know* much on the basis of our best explanations, fictionalists emphasize that we can still *use* our best explanations in the absence of this knowledge. Fictionalists can thereby articulate the principles behind the complaint that the realism debate is “pointless:” it does not matter if realism is true, for it is enough to treat social entities as useful fictions. More precisely, even if our best explanations posit social entities, we can still use those explanations without believing that posited social entities exist. Typical “uses” include explanation, prediction, control, and model construction. For instance, based on Blau and Duncan’s work, subsequent scholars have found it useful to explain social mobility in terms of social strata and social structures. However, fictionalists point out that all of this is compatible with agnosticism about these social entities.

While many social scientists express fictionalist commitments (e.g., Friedman 1953; MacDonald 2003), only a few philosophers are fictionalists about social entities (Demeter (2013) and Turner (2003) present fictionalist accounts of psychological states and social entities, respectively.) However, the resources for a more thoroughgoing fictionalism are easy to find. Van Fraassen’s (1980) constructive empiricism is a fictionalism that appears to apply to all science, though its chief applications have been in the natural sciences. Van Fraassen is a fictionalist about *unobservable* entities in science: he holds that we can use or accept posits about unobservable entities without believing that those entities exist. In other words, we can treat posits about unobservables as useful fictions (e.g. for the purposes of prediction and explanation.) This can be applied to the social sciences, for the unobservable-observable distinction cuts across the natural and social domains. For instance, subatomic particles, beliefs, and social norms all appear to resist any direct observation. However, fictionalists of this sort then inherit all of the challenges to van Fraassen’s view. For instance, some have wondered whether a distinction between observable and unobservable entities is sustainable (Churchland 1985; Hacking 1985). Arguably, this distinction is even more vexed in the social sciences (Block 1976).

To summarize, we have seen that realists deploy the Explanatory Argument to justify their position. Such a view holds that we should be realists about entities posited by our best explanations. Antirealist criticisms come in two broad varieties. First, explanatory pessimists question the extent to which we can trust our best explanations as a guide to what is real. Second, fictionalists argue that it is enough to use the posits of our best explanations, even if we do not think that they are real.

Before proceeding, a word of caution is in order. The Explanatory Argument presupposes that the social sciences ought to emulate the natural sciences. Specifically, it presupposes that realism about social entities is justified (and perhaps only justified) by social-scientific theories’ success in predicting, explaining,

and controlling the empirically testable parts of the social world. Indeed, even the critics of the Explanatory Argument assume this much of the time.

However, there is a longstanding debate as to whether the social sciences have different aims than the natural sciences. On this view, successful social theories need not be highly explanatory or predictive, but should instead furnish fruitful interpretations and give us a richer understanding of the people studied. This has led some philosophers to argue that because different sciences have fundamentally different methodologies, the entities in those sciences' respective domains are real or exist in different ways (Dupré 1993; Root 2000; Sundstrom 2002). On such a view, our beliefs in social entities' existence are subject to different standards than our beliefs in the existence of natural-scientific objects. By contrast, others argue that precisely because interpretation and understanding are more inquirer-relative than the explanation, prediction, and control characteristic of the natural sciences, realism about social entities is more difficult to defend than its natural-scientific counterpart (Reed 2008).

2. Are Social Groups Real?

Both explanatory pessimists and fictionalists criticize the first premise of the Explanatory Argument (EA1), which states that if our best explanations posit social entities, then we should be realists about those entities. However, many philosophers and social scientists have also challenged the second premise of this argument (EA2), which states that our best explanations posit social entities. For instance, we might wonder whether our best explanations of poverty *really* posit policies, social strata, or a culture of poverty, or if instead they only posit the individuals who are described by these social terms.

This concern shows up most clearly in discussions about the reality of social groups. Some find the idea of social groups standing over and above the individuals that constitute them to be spooky, and also find the methods of studying these groups to be unscientific. While these sorts of concerns are at least as old as Mill (1904) and Weber (1978), there is also a long tradition of defending the integrity of social groups and the distinctive methodology of the social sciences, e.g. Durkheim (2013). Contemporary heirs to Mill and Weber argue that "macro-level" social explanations must be grounded in "micro-foundations" that appeal only to individuals (Elster 2007; Hedström 2005); others demur (Colander 1996).

To that end, let's assess the following "Group Variant" of the Explanatory Argument:

GV1. If the best explanation of the relevant facts posits social *groups*, then we should believe that social *groups* exist.

GV2. The best explanation of the relevant facts posits social *groups*.

GV3. Therefore, we should believe that social *groups* exist.

As an example, consider why democracies tend not to fight wars with each other. Suppose that two democracies are in a dispute. Because losing a war has dire electoral consequences, both can anticipate that going to war will lead each to allocate large amounts of resources to a risky situation. Because of this, engaging in war is an unattractive option, as neither democracy is assured an easy victory (de Mesquita et al. 1999). As should be clear, this explanation posits social groups

(democracies or electorates). So, according to this argument, we should infer that these groups exist.

We will call those who subscribe to this argument *group realists*. Those opposed to group realism have two potential strategies. First, they can challenge GV1, in which case they pursue the explanatory pessimist and fictionalist strategies above. Alternatively, they can challenge GV2. To that end, it's useful to first consider the arguments in favor of GV2. (We address objections to GV2 below.)

First, group realists emphasize that talk of groups is pervasive in our ordinary discourse: we predicate things of groups ("Americans are materialistic"); we attribute mental states to groups ("The Cato Institute believes in free markets and individual liberty"); and we conceive of groups as unitary agents capable of acting in the world ("ExxonMobil intends to grow its worldwide crude and natural gas production by 7.5%"). Group membership figures in racial, ethnic, or religious group affiliation, and thereby plays a prominent role in our sense of identity. And groups need not be large, or institutional; some theorists argue that groups as small as two people are the fundamental elements of social reality (Gilbert 1989).

Moreover, the social sciences follow ordinary language in their use of groups as explanatory concepts. Sociologists appeal to group-based concepts such as social institutions, organizations, states, societies, and cultures, while economists appeal to such things as firms and networks. As should be clear from our discussion of democratic peace, social scientists use groups to explain (individual and collective) behavior. Some social scientists also use groups to account for the nature of social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991). On a cursory examination of social scientific practice, it would appear that GV2 is clearly true.

However, while nearly everyone agrees that social scientists *appear* to make use of groups in their theories, some argue that this appearance is misleading. Certain critics of group realism, whom we will call *eliminativists*, hold that our talk to social groups is false when taken literally (Quinton 1975)¹. Other critics of realism, whom we will call *reductionists*, hold that the use of social groups in our theorizing is dispensable: talk of social groups can always be translated into talk of the individuals that constitute the group. If either of these positions is correct, then our best explanations do not require us to posit social entities, and so GV2 would be false. In what follows, we examine these two alternatives to group realism.

2.1. Eliminativism

Eliminativists think that there are no such things as groups; rather, there are only individuals interacting with other individuals. This claim was memorably stated by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1987), who said:

...and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families. (Of course, for Thatcher to be a proper eliminativist, she would also have to say that there are no families.)

¹ While we are referring to eliminativism about social entities, "eliminativism" frequently refers to an analogous position about individual mental states (beliefs, desires, etc.) in the philosophy of psychology.

While eliminativists hold that claims invoking group concepts are false, eliminativists also maintain that true statements about individuals can replace these falsehoods. Thus, the claim that Americans are materialistic would be replaced by a claim to the effect that most of the individuals who are American citizens are materialistic.

On the face of it, eliminativism is counterintuitive. After all, eliminativists would have to hold that a claim of the form “FC Barcelona won the Champions League in 2015” is, strictly speaking, false; to be true, the claim should be reinterpreted so that it has the form “Xavi and Iniesta and Messi and Neymar and etc. won the Champions League.” But regardless of what we want to say about that second claim, it seems wrong to say that FC Barcelona did *not* win the Champions League, on the grounds that there is no such thing as FC Barcelona.

Why, then, is eliminativism a plausible view? Some think that methodological individualism entails eliminativism, and so they find eliminativism plausible because they find methodological individualism plausible (Tuomela 1990). That argument, however, appears unsound. Methodological individualism requires that claims about collective entities be grounded in claims about the actions and properties of individuals, but that is consistent with collective entities’ existence. So, one can be a methodological individualist without also being an eliminativist. (For more on methodological individualism, read the chapter on methodological individualism in this volume.)

Eliminativists must hold a stronger view. First, eliminativists must hold that *only* those things that factor into our best explanations determine what exists; and second, that *none* of our best explanations appeal to groups. These claims are strong, because social groups are featured in legitimate explanations all the time. Consider the following explanation of why more committed sports fans are likelier to be violent after their team’s loss than less committed fans: whereas wins by a sports team enhance the social identity and self-esteem of all fans, losses only decrease the psychological well-being of those fans who most strongly identify with the team. Strongly identified fans then act aggressively in order to regain that well-being (Wann et al. 2001). If we paraphrase away the football club to be instead about the individual members, the explanation no longer identifies the main causes of spectator aggression. After all, membership of a team can change without a change in fan identification, and some people can strongly identify with a team without knowing all of its individual members.

Eliminativist arguments might work for establishing that particular *kinds* of social groups are not real. Consider groups such as “unwed mothers between the ages of 18 and 30” and “individuals who self-identify as Jewish.” These are examples of groups such that possessing some set of properties is necessary and sufficient for membership in the group. While these groups sometimes seem to contribute to social scientific explanations, the eliminativist would argue that the group functions in an explanation only insofar as the membership in the group highlights the causal factors that actually play an explanatory role. Because each of the individuals who make up the group possesses the properties that define the group, it will be those properties that are doing the explanatory work; the group is doing no work at all.

2.2. Reductionism

A third position, *reductionism*, falls in between eliminativism and group realism. A quick note about the term “reductionism:” in certain discussions, reductionism is synonymous with eliminativism. The reason for this conflation is understandable, as reductionists agree with eliminativists that our best explanations do not posit social groups, i.e. they also deny GV2. Specifically, any of our best explanations that purport to posit social groups are really just shorthand for individualistic explanations. Moreover, individualistic factors are doing the real work in these explanations. However, like group realists, reductionists hold that social groups exist. So, following the philosophical mainstream, we will distinguish reductionism from eliminativism.

Two crucial claims justify reductionists’ claim that social groups exist. First, reductionists assume that individuals exist. Second, and more controversially, they argue that social groups are nothing over and above the individuals that comprise them. From these two claims, it follows *trivially* that social groups exist. The triviality of this inference means that social groups don’t exist in any “robust” or “substantive” sense. Thus, social groups are dispensable or redundant given information about the individuals who comprise them. For this reason, reductionists are sometimes called “redundant realists” (List and Pettit 2011).

However, reductionists differ from group realists in the explanatory roles they accord to social groups. Reductionists hold that individuals are ontologically fundamental while also allowing that statements about groups need not be strictly speaking false. Since reductionists hold that groups are not essential to our explanatory aims, and since all statements about groups can be translated to statements about individuals but not vice versa, reductionists deny that the best explanation of social phenomena requires us to posit social entities—we can make do with individual entities instead.

Like eliminativism, reductionism faces several challenges. For one thing, reductionists must account for the functional structure of social institutions. Social institutions are multiply realized in the behavior of individuals, meaning the institution itself can act in the same way even when the behavior of the constituent individuals is different. Consider the explanation of democratic peace from above. When we try to understand how the electorate influences the decisions of democratic leaders, a description of individual votes doesn’t matter; what matters is a description of the voting of the electorate as a whole. If this is so, then explanatory claims which appeal to the social institution at the group level will work differently than explanatory claims which appeal to the social institution at the individual level: group-level claims explain in virtue of the *structural relationship* between the members, while individual-level claims explain in virtue of the properties of the individuals themselves (Kincaid 1986).

Finally, reductionism fails to explain how social groups can act as unitary agents, i.e. how firms, institutions, and the like intend to do things, perform actions, and hold action-relevant beliefs and desires. Indeed, List and Pettit (2011) argue that group agents *necessarily* possess action-relevant mental states that cannot be reduced to individual mental states. Similarly, Gilbert (1989) argues that group

mental states have a distinctive normative component that cannot be generated by individually held mental states.

3. Can Things be Real *and* “Constructed”?

Many social scientists (and some philosophers) describe themselves as “social constructivists” (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1991). However, there is significant disagreement as to what this doctrine entails, whether it is defensible, and if it is incompatible with realism. For instance, many social scientists equivocate between *reality itself* depending on social conditions, interests, and the like, and the more modest claim that our *representations* of reality exhibit this social dependence. Any careful formulation of the former is very difficult to defend. By contrast, the latter is compatible with there being a world with a structure that is independent of these representations, i.e. it is compatible with realism (Boghossian 2006). More qualified forms of constructivism claim that social scientists, as the foremost experts on society, play a special role in constructing social entities. For instance, MacKenzie, Muniesa, and Siu (2007) claim that economists make (i.e. construct) the markets that they study.

For our purposes, we will treat constructivists as a distinct kind of antirealist. To get a sense of the debate between realists and constructivists, consider three statements:

Vertebrate: Chris and Pat are vertebrates.

Marriage: Chris and Pat are married.

Cute: Chris and Pat are cute.

Intuitively, *Vertebrate* is true in some “objective” sense, and *Cute* is only true in some “subjective” sense. In principle, moderate realists and moderate constructivists can agree on these points. The disagreement concerns claims such as *Marriage*. Are these contested claims more “objective” like *Vertebrate* or more “subjective” like *Cute*? To make any progress, we need to get clearer on what “objectivity” and “subjectivity” mean in these contexts. To do this, we first examine the constructivist’s claim that social entities “depend” on us, and then turn to the kind of objectivity at stake in the realist-constructivist debates.

3.1. Kinds of dependence

Regardless of any further differences, all social constructivists hold that a constructed entity “depends” on something social in some way for its existence. More precisely, constructivist claims always involves two entities. The first is what we will call the *dependent entity*. We will focus on cases in which the dependent entity is a social entity. In our example, Chris and Pat’s marriage is the dependent entity. The second is the *constructing entity*, i.e. the entity on which the dependent entity depends. Necessarily, constructing entities have to be social or psychological entities. Presumably, the constructing entities in our example are the marriage laws in Chris and Pat’s community.

It is precisely the dependence on constructing entities that is supposed to preclude dependent entities from being real. Consequently, we must specify what this dependence entails, and how it bears on realism. To that end, we must distinguish two central kinds of dependence that figure in the constructivist

literature (though see Sveinsdóttir (forthcoming) for a more nuanced taxonomy of constructions). First, there is *causal dependence*:

F causally depends on an individualistic/social entity *G* if and only if *F* would never have come into existence, or would have been substantially different, had *G* not existed.

While our chief concern is with constructed *social* entities, many causally constructed entities are *not* social entities. For instance, some elements, such as Rutherfordium, can only be created in laboratories, and hence causally depend on scientists' intention to synthesize such elements. However, elements are paradigmatic examples of physical (non-social) entities. More broadly, all artifacts are causally constructed. For instance, a manufacturer's intending to produce a bicycle is a cause of that bicycle's existence.

There is widespread consensus that causally constructed entities are real. Bicycles are causally dependent entities, and we have no more reason to be antirealists about bicycles than Rutherfordium and other natural-scientific entities. Thus, insofar as social entities are simply the effects of people's mental states and actions, then there is no reason to treat them as any less real than other artifacts.

However, there is good reason to think that some social entities, such as marriage, are not merely causally constructed. This is because marriage exhibits a different kind of dependence:

F constitutively depends on individualistic/social entity *G* if and only if the continued existence of *G* is a necessary condition for the continued existence of *F*.

Causally dependent entities can continue to exist even after the entities that constructed them have ceased to exist. By contrast, constitutively dependent entities cannot. To make this vivid, consider the status of constructed entities if every human were to disappear spontaneously: bicycles would continue to exist; marriages would not.

While realism about causally constructed entities is generally accepted, realism about constitutively constructed entities is more controversial. Some authors are realists about these entities (Haslanger 2012). Their argument proceeds in two steps. First, against those who think that marriage is more like cuteness, they deny that there is a good inference from "x is mind-dependent" to "x is not real" (Haslanger 2012; Rosen 1994). Second, they use the Explanatory Argument from above, but the relevant posits are constitutively dependent entities. For instance, some hold that race and gender play prominent explanatory roles in social inquiry, and hence are real, even though they are constitutively dependent on certain social conditions. This would suggest the following "Constitutive Variant" of the Explanatory Argument:

- CV1. If the best explanation of the relevant facts posits constitutively dependent entities, then we should believe that constitutively dependent entities exist.
- CV2. The best explanation of the relevant facts posits constitutively dependent entities.
- C. Therefore, we should believe that constitutively dependent entities exist.

Realists of this persuasion might argue in the following manner. Marriage is constitutively dependent. Moreover, our best explanations posit marriage as a central determinant of, e.g., psychological well-being (Gove, Hughes, and Style 1983). Consequently, we ought to believe that marriage exists.

However, there are at least three objections to this argument. First, since constitutively dependent entities are simply a kind of social entity, the same objections to the Explanatory Argument apply to its Constitutive Variant. Hence, if explanatory pessimism, fictionalism, eliminativism, or reductionism is correct about social entities in general, they also apply to constitutively dependent entities.

Second, the Constitutive Variant Argument might prove too much. For instance, it is unclear why cuteness is not constitutively dependent upon people's attitudes and emotions. Moreover, cuteness might well figure in some of our best explanations, e.g. of the popularity of puppy memes on the Internet. However, as we have already suggested, realism about cuteness is implausible. While some realists have bitten this bullet (Haslanger 2012), others would take this as evidence that the first premise of the argument (CV1) is incorrect.

Third, it appears that explanations only invoking constitutively *constructing* entities can always "screen off" or "preempt" any explanation of which their corresponding constitutively *dependent* entity is a part. As a result, the second premise (CV2) of this argument can be contested. For instance, puppies' cuteness is constitutively dependent upon our attitudes about them. Consequently, it seems as if we could just as well explain the prevalence of Internet puppy memes by appealing to these attitudes, rather than adding another property—cuteness—into our ontologies. Similarly, although *attitudes* about race and gender explain various social outcomes, this does not entail that race and gender are real or explanatory. In other words, to the extent that an entity is constitutively constructed, it is unlikely to play the kind of role in our best explanations that licenses ontological commitment.

3.2. Objectivity

Another way of refining the Explanatory Argument so that it underwrites realism about constitutively dependent entities is to identify further criteria that distinguish real constitutive constructions—such as race and gender—from other kinds of constitutively dependent entities—such as cuteness. Here, we might (loosely) follow John Searle's (1995) suggestion that even if the *existence* of certain social entities depends on attitudes and social conditions, our *judgments* about those entities might be no less objective than our judgments about natural-scientific entities.

For instance, consider once again the statement that Chris and Pat are married. Marriages are constitutively dependent entities: the marriage of two people only exists insofar as it is appropriately held to exist by the legal structures of the society in which the participants live. Nevertheless, there is a fact of the matter about whether Chris and Pat are married, such as the recognized laws about marriage, and whether the procedures required by those laws were properly followed. More generally,

F is epistemically objective if and only if it is possible to hold that something is an *F* and be wrong.

Here, the “holder” (i.e. constructing entities) can either be an individual or a group. As should be clear, some entities, such as vertebrates, are epistemically objective. It is possible for somebody to be mistaken about who or what is a vertebrate. Moreover, we can also see why some social entities are epistemically objective. For instance, suppose that Chris and Pat are a legally married same-sex couple. Because of his religious beliefs, Frank may believe that Chris and Pat are not married. However, Frank’s religious beliefs do not nullify Chris and Pat’s marriage. Similarly, at first remove, no single individual’s beliefs about race, gender, marriage, employment, income, etc. are capable of nullifying empirical statements about these social entities.

By contrast, judgments about cuteness function differently in our cognitive lives. They are epistemically *subjective*. In particular, the truth of (nontrivial) judgments about cuteness depends on the mental states of the person judging something to be cute. In other words:

A group or person’s holding that a puppy is cute entails that the puppy is cute.

The Searlean realist claims that cuteness is in the eye of the beholder, while many claims about social entities such as marriage are not. How does this bear on social constructivism? While accounts of epistemic objectivity claim that “holders” are either individuals or groups, social constructivists will typically favor an account of epistemic subjectivity that regards holders as social groups:

F is epistemically subjective if and only if some group’s holding that something is an *F* entails its being an *F*.

(Note: our discussion of epistemic subjectivity and objectivity is indebted, but not identical, to Searle’s account.) As noted above, it is implausible that an individual, such as Frank, can nullify a marriage. By contrast, certain social groups or their proxies—such as a legislature or a judge—can nullify a marriage. Hence, the constructivist’s position poses an interesting challenge for realists about constitutively dependent entities.

To summarize, both realists and constructivists might agree that some social entity is constitutively constructed. However, realists will claim that the entity is epistemically objective (and hence more like *Vertebrate*), while constructivists will claim that it is epistemically subjective (and hence more like *Cute*). For instance, constructivists will claim that judgments about membership in racial groups depend on some social group making that judgment.

How do we adjudicate between these competing claims? In the context of the social sciences, the defensibility of this kind of constructivism hinges (in part) on the specific methods that are used to make judgments about the social entity in question. For instance, some interpretive methodologies are sufficiently reflexive that social scientists’ intuitions, feelings, beliefs, etc. necessarily figure in their judgments about social entities (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Denzin 2001; Wylie 1994). Insofar as these methods are the only or best means of acquiring knowledge about certain social entities, constructivism *cum* epistemic subjectivism is relatively straightforward.

By contrast, some methods—particularly those that are shared with the natural sciences—purport to be answerable to a set of mind-independent empirical

facts. These include observation, measurement, statistical analysis, and causal inference. If these methods do what they purport to do, then constructivism about the judgments that they justify would appear misplaced. However, some have advanced this particularly ambitious brand of constructivism about social entities (Law 2004), by appealing to constructivists about natural-scientific entities who deny the objectivity of these methods (Bloor 1976; Kuhn 1996; Latour 1987; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Pickering 1984, 1995).

So, to summarize, the debate between constructivists and realists about social entities is not a debate about entities that are causally dependent on social conditions. Otherwise, Rutherfordium would be socially constructed. Rather, it is a debate about constitutively constructed entities. However, some constitutively constructed entities, such as cuteness, do not seem to warrant realist treatment. So, when realists and constructivists disagree about constitutively dependent entities, the real sticking point is whether such entities are epistemically objective or epistemically subjective, i.e. whether the means for making judgments about these entities suffices to make those judgments true.

4. Conclusion

In summary, whether one is discussing social groups, social constructions, or any other social entity, realists appeal first and foremost to the Explanatory Argument. According to this argument, if our best explanations posit social entities, then we ought to believe that these entities exist. However, explanatory pessimists cite science's history of failed explanations as evidence against this contention. Fictionalists also challenge this realist doctrine by claiming that we can use social entities in our best explanations without believing in their existence.

The Explanatory Argument also asserts that our best explanations posit social entities. Paying special attention to social groups reveals two challenges to this claim. First, eliminativists claim that statements about social groups are false, and should be replaced by statements about individuals. Second, reductionists claim that statements about social groups are trivially true, because they are really just shorthand for statements about individuals. In neither case do our best explanations posit social entities.

Yet another aspect of realism concerns the objectivity of social entities. As we saw, realists hold that social entities are epistemically objective, in the sense that a group's or person's ideas about a social entity could be wrong. Constructivists, by contrast, claim that (at least some) social entities are epistemically subjective, meaning that ideas about those entities determine what they are.

A number of options and questions suggest themselves. Can realism in the social sciences be justified without the Explanatory Argument? Can the challenges of eliminativism and reductionism extend to social entities other than groups? If social entities are not real, why bother studying them? What would social scientists lose by adopting one (or more) of the antirealist stances canvassed above? Given the variety of positions available, there is ample room for having nuanced ontological positions in the social sciences.

Notes

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Related Topics

Kuhn's Influence on the Social Sciences; Explanation; Reductionism; Methodological Individualism; Naturalism; Collective Intentionality; Social Ontology; Critical Realism; Objectivity; Social Construction of Knowledge

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Further Reading

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