



Causal powers and social ontology

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg¹ 

Received: 6 September 2017 / Accepted: 13 March 2018
© The Author(s) 2018

Abstract Over the last few decades, philosophers and social scientists have applied the so-called powers ontology to the social domain. I argue that this application is highly problematic: many of the alleged powers in the social realm violate the intrinsicity condition, and those that can be coherently taken to be intrinsic to their bearers are arguably causally redundant. I end the paper by offering a diagnosis of why philosophers and social scientists have been tempted to think that there are powers in social realm.

Keywords Causal powers · Causation · Critical realism · Deontic powers · Dispositions · Emergence · Extrinsic · Intrinsic · Social ontology

1 Introduction

Since the early 1970s, non-Humean causal powers—often referred to simply as *powers*—have made a prominent return to philosophy.¹ Initially invoked primarily in the philosophy of physics and chemistry (e.g. Harré 1970, 1997; Harré and Madden 1975; Bhaskar 1975/2008; Cartwright 1983), powers were subsequently put to use in meta-

¹ Terminological alternatives here abound. Names for powers have included: “tendencies” (e.g. Johansson 1989/2004), “capacities” (e.g. Cartwright 1999), “dispositional properties” (e.g. Ellis 2001), “potencies” (e.g. Bird 2007), and, in indeterministic contexts, “propensities” (e.g. Dupré 1993). The concept can arguably be traced back to Aristotle (e.g. *Metaphysics*, book Theta), as advocates of powers generally acknowledge.

✉ Tobias Hansson Wahlberg
tobias.hansson_wahlberg@fil.lu.se
<http://www.fil.lu.se/en/person/TobiasHanssonWahlberg>

¹ Department of Philosophy, Lund University, LUX, Helgonavägen 3, Box 192, 221 00 Lund, Sweden

physics (e.g. Shoemaker 1980/1997; Johansson 1989/2004; Ellis 2001; Molnar 2003; Bird 2007; Mumford and Anjum 2011), the philosophy of biology (e.g. Dupré 1993), and, in recent years, the philosophy of social science and social ontology (e.g. Archer 1995; Cartwright 1999; Lawson 1997, 2013; Porpora 2008; Elder-Vass 2010; Groff 2011; Kaidesoja 2013; but see already Bhaskar 1979/1998). Indeed, there is now an interdisciplinary movement, called critical realism, which among other things applies powers to the social realm. In this paper, I question the deployment of powers within the social domain.² I also offer a diagnosis of how and where defenders of that deployment go astray. I do so by distinguishing between true ability predications and powers, between constitutive (or “performative”) abilities and powers, and between deontic powers and causal powers. These distinctions tend to be jumbled up in the literature.

The plan is as follows: I begin by identifying the core features of powers, as they are generally characterized in the literature (Sect. 2). I then look at powers in the social domain, and I argue that they are either contradictory or causally redundant entities (Sect. 3). I end the paper with my diagnosis (or diagnoses) of why philosophers and social scientists have been tempted to think that there are powers in the social realm (Sect. 4).

2 What are powers? A brief recap of their core features

Powers are generally taken to be real—i.e. ontic, non-nominalistic (sometimes called “sparse”, as opposed to “abundant”³)—properties with the following characteristics:

- (a) they are intrinsic to their bearers;⁴
- (b) they have their causal abilities essentially.⁵

Characteristic (a) entails that powers are not extrinsic properties, i.e. properties that are had by objects in virtue of their standing (or not standing) in certain relations to

² For a recent attack on macro powers, see Bird (2016). Although the present paper is in line with Bird’s, he does not address the specific problems associated with powers in the social realm.

³ Properties understood in nominalistic terms (e.g. in terms of true predications or set-theoretic constructions) are widely regarded as “abundant”: for example, according to standard set nominalism, *any* set of objects, no matter how disparate and gerrymandered, is a “property” (e.g. Lewis 1986, pp. 59–60). Ontic or “natural” properties such as universals and tropes (causal powers may be either: see e.g. Molnar 2003, p. 23 and Bird 2007, pp. 12–13) are generally taken to be much harder to come by—hence the term “sparse” (Lewis 1986, pp. 60, 64). Crucially, on the ontic conception of powers, it need not be the case that every true dispositional predication corresponds to a power (see e.g. Ellis 2001, p. 112; Molnar 2003, pp. 27–28; Bird 2007, Ch. 2). I will return to this issue below, in particular in Sect. 4.

⁴ For example, Rom Harré (1970, p. 85, emphasis original) states: “*X* has the power to *A* = if *X* is subject to stimuli or conditions of an appropriate kind, then *X* will do *A*, in virtue of its intrinsic nature.” See also Harré and Madden (1975, p. 86), Harré (1997, pp. 21, 24), Bhaskar (1975/2008, p. 231), Shoemaker (1980/1997, pp. 241, 243), Johansson (1989/2004, pp. 163, 171), Cartwright (1999, pp. 72, 138), Ellis (2001, p. 106), Molnar (2003, pp. 58, 108–110), Lawson (2007, p. 123), Bird (2007, pp. 29–31, 125), Groff (2011, p. 309), Kaidesoja (2013, p. 136), Little (2016, pp. 192, 196) and Marmorodoro (2017, pp. 62–63). The intrinsicity condition is arguably also present in Aristotle’s theorizing about *dunamis* (his term for potentiality or power)—see e.g. *Metaphysics*, book Theta, Chapter I.

⁵ See, e.g., Shoemaker (1980/1997, pp. 234, 236–239, 244), Ellis (2001, pp. 52–53, 112, 124), Chakravartty (2007, p. 130), Bird (2007, p. 3, 2016), Groff (2011, p. 309), Mumford and Anjum (2011, p. 5) and Cartwright and Pemberton (2013, p. 95).

external entities.⁶ Characteristic (b) makes powers distinct from *categorical* properties. Categorical properties are properties that have their causal abilities (if any) only contingently (e.g. via contingent laws of nature). They are so-called quiddities: properties whose identity is not tied to what they can do. By contrast, a power's identity is tied to what it can do.

Powers thus understood are usually invoked for two purposes: to defend strong production, as opposed to regularity, views of causation (e.g. Harré and Madden 1975; Bhaskar 1975/2008; Shoemaker 1980/1997; Cartwright 1983; Johansson 1989/2004; Ingthorsson 2002; Molnar 2003; Mumford and Anjum 2011; Marmodoro 2017), and to eliminate or deflate the role of laws of nature in explanations of events and cross-time regularities (Cartwright 1983, 1999; Ellis 2001; Mumford 2004; Chakravartty 2007; Bird 2007; Cartwright and Pemberton 2013). Powers in the social domain are typically postulated to serve both of these functions (see e.g. Elder-Vass 2010 for an instructive overview and discussion).

3 Putative powers in the social domain

Concrete examples of powers at work in the social domain are surprisingly rare in the literature. Defenders of powers in the social realm tend to focus more on abstract theorizing, and on programmatic formulations and defences. Nevertheless, examples are occasionally supplied. The Cambridge economist Tony Lawson, for example, maintains in a recent volume dedicated to Roy Bhaskar (who was a student of Rom Harré's and co-founder of the modern conception of powers):

My contention is not only that there are indeed causal properties, powers and entities reasonably so identified as social, but also that such features are just as real or objective as those of any other domain, bearing their own irreducible causal powers, justifying and indeed warranting their separate, specialised and relatively autonomous form of scientific study. [...] Among the global powers of social systems [e.g. tribes, families, universities, firms, trade unions, political parties, research groups, sports clubs, armies, etc. (p. 297)] are the abilities to stage Olympic Games, wage wars, raise taxes, hold elections, establish international treaties, conduct strikes, form monetary unions, and so on. (Lawson 2013, pp. 286, 298)

And Lawson says about individuals in, or members of, social systems that:

...individuals positioned as members of a particular community become the bearers of emergent positional powers. Thus a police officer can arrest suspects, a judge can pass a sentence, and doctors prescribe drugs. (Lawson 2013, p. 298)

⁶ Powers are no doubt standardly taken to be related to, or “directed” towards, their possible and actual manifestation effects, but these relations are typically supposed to flow from, or be grounded in, the nature of the powers rather than the other way round (*pace* Barker 2013; see e.g. Molnar 2003, Ch. 3; Chakravartty 2007, pp. 139–141, 146–147; Heil 2012, pp. 144–148; but see Bird 2007, Ch. 6, for a structuralist analysis of powers' identities—he denies, however, rightly in my view, that such an account renders powers extrinsic, *ibid.*, p. 141).

Lawson is not alone in presenting these kinds of example: similar claims can be found scattered in the work of other supporters of a powers-based social ontology.⁷ Lawson's formulations are particularly succinct, however, and I will therefore attend primarily to them in what follows, referring to additional examples and claims when needed.

Now, the question that should be asked—but which is not asked by proponents of powers in the social realm—is how the postulated powers fare with respect to benchmarks (a) and (b). I shall argue that they fare badly on (a). However, in focusing on (a) I am not suggesting that their compatibility with (b) is unproblematic. Far from it—I think there are problems here, but that these become largely redundant given what I argue below.⁸

So: Are the putative powers mentioned by Lawson intrinsic to their bearers? I think it is evident that a large proportion are not.

Consider to begin with individuals bearing so-called positional powers: the purported powers of policemen, judges and doctors. Clearly—as no doubt Lawson would unhesitatingly agree—it is only relative to a societal context that a certain person, with a certain history, is a policeman, judge or doctor, and has the ability (in the society in question) to arrest suspects, pass sentences, or prescribe drugs. To dramatize: an intrinsic duplicate of the person in question (as the person is at a certain time) existing alone

⁷ For example, sociologist Dave Elder-Vass mentions the causal power of a “norm circle” to influence the normative beliefs and behaviour of individual persons (2010, p. 124), an organisation to dismiss employees and to sell various products (ibid., pp. 73, 173), a university to assign marks (ibid., p. 199), and a bank to make loans to persons (2012, p. 89). Moreover, summing up his views, Elder-Vass states: “These emergent properties are, I have argued, identical with the real causal powers described by Roy Bhaskar in his theory of causation.” Nancy Cartwright, who expresses her intellectual debt to Harré (Cartwright 1999, p. 73), maintains that taxes have the capacity (her word for power) to affect prices, and that price has the capacity to affect quantity supplied (ibid., pp. 55, 60). Mumford and Anjum suggest that money has the power to cause happiness (Mumford and Anjum 2011, p. 89). And so on. Note that Harré himself originally applied the power notion to the social domain, although in later work he is sceptical of this application (e.g. Harré 2013). For example, in his 1970 paper, he remarks in passing that to be a deputy, a hangman, or an attorney, one has to have certain powers that are part of the nature of being a deputy etc.: “To strip a deputy of his powers is just what is required to make him cease to be a deputy. A hangman without the power of execution is a hangman no longer, he is but a former hangman.” (Harré 1970, p. 92; see also Harré and Madden 1975, p. 95).

⁸ Nevertheless, let me briefly indicate one worry one might have about (b): Supposing that *being a police officer, being a judge, being a university* and so on are ontic properties (which is doubtful, see Hansson Wahlberg (2014a) and below), it can be questioned whether such sortal properties have their (alleged) causal abilities essentially. It seems clear that the abilities of police officers, judges, and universities (as entities instantiating these sortal properties) are contingent and depend on such factors as the legal system. The abilities of police officers and universities can be changed over time, and at a given time they may differ between countries. Thus, on the assumption that the relevant abilities are causal (which I will question below), it seems that they are in any case not *essential* features of the sortal properties in question (cf. Little 2016, pp. 196–198). The essentialist aspect may be more plausible in relation to mere “characterizing” social properties, such as *having the ability to raise taxes, having the ability to hold elections* etc., but the case for essentialism in these cases should nevertheless be argued for, not tacitly assumed. In the end I think these considerations are idle: below I will argue that in addition to being extrinsic, many of the abilities in question are not causal but “constitutive”. Moreover, I will argue that the abilities that can coherently be conceived of as intrinsic and causal properties turn out, on close scrutiny, to be mere overdeterminers and hence redundant properties.

on a remote planet would not have these powers.⁹ It is precisely because these abilities are relative to a societal context (i.e. to the attitudes of external agents, to regulatory structures, and so on) that they fall under the province of social ontology (cf. Searle 1995) and can be called *social* abilities. If they were not relative to social context, they would be mere individual abilities and not features of social reality. Again, I think Lawson would readily agree with this verdict of extrinsicness: indeed, he is explicitly developing a *social* ontology (e.g. Lawson 2013, pp. 285, 288 ff), and the powers in question are supposed to be *positional* powers, i.e. powers attaching to a position *within* society (ibid, pp. 292–293, 298). But then the obvious objection is that positional powers cannot really be Aristotelian/Harréan/Bhaskarian powers, not as long as they attach to a position the features of which are socially grounded. That is, it must be false, strictly speaking, that “individuals positioned as members of a particular community become the bearers of emergent positional *powers*” (Lawson 2013, p. 298, my emphasis).

Consider next the putative “global” (or higher-level) powers of social systems. In principle, abilities of groups and other complex social entities can be said to be social in the trivial sense that they are abilities of, or ascribed to, *complex* entities consisting of many people. Several of the examples here, however, concern abilities that are relative to a *larger* societal context in the same way that the social abilities of individuals are social, i.e. in the sense of “social” or “positional” referred to in the paragraph above: let us call this extrinsic mode of being social, *social^E*. (Lawson’s own brief characterization of “social features” does not strictly distinguish between these two modes of sociality: “Primary candidates for features to be classified as social, I take it, are those [...] that arise out of, and depend necessarily upon, human interactions (clearly constituting a unique mode of being); those, if any, that could not exist in the absence of human beings and their doings” (Lawson 2013, p. 285). This kind of ambiguity is endemic in current social ontology literature.) For example, it is only relative to a wider societal context that a certain group of people constitutes a government, and has the ability to raise taxes, declare war, or ratify international treaties;

⁹ According some contemporary cosmologists, it may very well be that we do not have to imagine that such a solitary person exists in a non-actual possible world: they argue that if the universe is infinitely large, as there are reasons to think it is, and if matter is evenly distributed across it, there will be infinitely many such duplicates across the actual universe (see e.g. Greene 2011, Ch. 2).

A possible escape route from the duplication objection: endorse so-called qua-objects (e.g. Fine 1999, pp. 67–68). That is, hold that the relevant powers are intrinsic to the policeman/judge/doctor in question *qua* policeman/judge/doctor (i.e. under that description), and that any intrinsic duplicate of the relevant *qua-object* consequently will have these very powers (thanks to Fabrice Correia and Christian List for pointing out this escape route). Notice, though, that this move—which excludes solitary intrinsic duplicates—can only be defended at the price of denying that specific policemen, judges, and doctors are numerically identical with ordinary persons. On the qua-view, they are rather identical with peculiar compounds consisting of a person plus the relevant social property. Elsewhere, I argue against the existence of such qua-objects (see Hansson Wahlberg 2014a, pp. 530–533, 542): on my view, a specific policeman/judge/doctor is numerically identical with a certain person—a policeman does not contain a person as a proper part. Rather, the person in question simply has acquired a new, extrinsic, social status (arguably, a social sortal “property” of a non-ontic, abundant kind) of being a policeman/judge/doctor in the society in question.

Interestingly, by referring to an enlarged entity, the qua-move does have some affinities with the system/community move discussed in the main text below. Nevertheless, it should be distinguished from it. A qua-object generated from an individual under a social description is not a social system consisting of many individuals, but rather a compound consisting of an individual plus a social property (cf. Fine, *ibid.*).

and it is only relative to a larger societal context that a firm exists, and has the ability to issue shares, sell products, and hire and dismiss employees; and so on. Thus, the objection mentioned in the previous paragraph generalizes: typically, even the alleged powers of social systems are extrinsic, and hence not powers in the technical sense.¹⁰

One way of rescuing these alleged powers, and showing that they are after all intrinsic properties, is to hold that they are really powers of a larger social system of which the individual or the relevant social system is a proper part. Following this, the powers would be social, not social^E. This adjusted view (or something similar) appears occasionally to be advocated by defenders of powers in the social domain, although not explicitly with the purpose of defending intrinsicity. For example, Lawson—I think incoherently—says of individuals and their alleged positional powers (I suppose he would want to extend the reasoning to positional powers of social sub-systems as well):

...the positional powers are always *system properties* and individuals remain the agents of these powers only when appropriately positioned and relationally organised as components of the system. Thus when a police officer arrests a suspect, or a judge passes sentence, the powers of arrest or sentencing are those of the *community*. (Lawson 2013, p. 298, my emphases; see also Elder-Vass 2010, pp. 27–28)

It is important to note, though, that if these powers of individuals and sub-systems really are instantiated at the level of whole communities, then strictly speaking there cannot be any positional powers. For, if the powers are really instantiated by the relevant system as a whole, it cannot truly be said that “individuals positioned as members of a particular community become the *bearers* of emergent positional powers” and that “individuals *remain the agents* of these powers” when appropriately positioned and relationally organised (Lawson 2013, p. 298, my emphasis)—unless, of course, people like Lawson want to hold that the relevant powers are instantiated *both* by communities as wholes and by their relevant sub-components.¹¹ If they do want to defend this last

¹⁰ Could defenders of powers in the social domain simply retort that apart from the classic intrinsic powers, there are extrinsic versions of them? One difficulty here is that critical realists and their kin often explicitly claim to be adopting the theory of powers as *developed by Harré and his followers* (see e.g. Lawson 1997, 2013, pp. 20–21, and fn. 7 above), or even by Aristotle. Indeed, the article by Lawson in question is published in an anthology entitled *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: The New Aristotelianism*. Clearly, these notable forerunners take powers to be *intrinsic* properties or features of objects (see footnote 4 above). A second difficulty is that it is unclear what ontic, non-Humean (and non-Armstrongean—see e.g. his 1997) extrinsic causal powers could be—even if we allow that the technical term “power” does not *analytically* entail intrinsicity, which it arguably does, as it is generally defined in the literature. No one has tried to explain this. In any case, in Sect. 4 I will offer an alternative, constructive account of these putative powers according to which they are not *productive* abilities but rather extrinsically grounded *constitutive* abilities.

¹¹ Some formulations by Elder-Vass seem to suggest such a double view. Speaking of “intrastructure” of organisations, he says, for example: “those properties that the individual acquires by occupying their role are essentially properties of the organisation localized in the individual”; and “The causal power of the organisation to sell a television [Please note that this ability depends on factors and regulations that are external to the organisation in question. THW] is in effect delegated to the salesperson, who exercises that causal power on the organisation’s behalf.” (Elder-Vass 2010, pp. 158, 173). However, other remarks by Elder-Vass suggest a view according to which the double position is rejected: only the organization (or the relevant higher-level entity) is said to “really” instantiate the relevant power (*ibid.*, pp. 27–28; see also Elder-Vass 2012, p. 88).

elaboration, the objection from extrinsicity discussed above simply reappears: sub-components can only be bearers or agents of these powers on pain of rendering the powers extrinsic. I take it, then, that the community move can only save the relevant powers as bone fide *powers* (in all their manifestations) if the powers in question are regarded as *strictly* emergent properties—that is, as ontic, irreducible properties of complex wholes which are *not* also instantiated by proper parts of the wholes in question.¹² (Compare with Lawson, who calls the would-be positional powers of individuals within societies “emergent positional powers” (2013, p. 298). It is not crystal clear what concept(s) of emergence Lawson is operating with. One possibility is that he is alluding to Mario Bunge’s unorthodox definition of emergence: “*P* is an *emergent* property of a thing *b* if and only if either *b* is a complex thing (system) no component of which possesses *P*, or *b* is an individual that possesses *P* by virtue of being a component of a system (i.e. *b* would not possess *P* if it were independent or isolated)” (Bunge 1996, p. 20). However, the problem here is that the latter disjunct has application to extrinsic properties only; it cannot capture emergence of *powers*. Only the first disjunct can be of relevance here, strictly speaking).

Postulating strictly emergent properties at the level of communities is deeply problematic, however—even if we disregard the troubling fact that it is unclear what the boundaries of communities are, and hence what the real bearers of these powers are. If a community has strictly emergent causal powers to hold elections, raise taxes, arrest suspects, and pass sentences, then it has, as a whole, causal powers to affect (among other things) its own proper parts and constituents. This type of causation, from wholes to proper parts, is usually referred to as downward causation. Infamously, the notion faces various difficulties. First, it is not clear how downward causation is supposed to work—some have even questioned the very coherence of the notion (see e.g. Kim 1999; Hulswit 2006 for detailed discussions). Secondly, and relatedly, downward causation (assuming it exists) seems in many cases to be a *redundant* phenomenon given the causal abilities and activities of the whole’s interrelated parts: unless the emergent causal powers of the whole can somehow *intervene*, and alter the constituents’ interactions, there seems to be nothing left for the higher-level powers to do (see e.g. Merricks 2001, 2005; Bird 2008—this is often referred to as the exclusion argument). Now, I am not aware of a general proof to the effect that there can be no non-redundant downward causation in the social realm (assuming the coherence of the concept as such), but elsewhere (Hansson Wahlberg 2014b) I have argued in some detail, con-

¹² I take reducibility to involve identification (see Hansson Wahlberg 2017b). Since I am skeptical (see Hansson Wahlberg 2014b, 2017b; see also Smid 2017, Ch. 3) about the so-called composition as identity thesis (Cotnoir and Baxter 2014), I would regard even so-called “structural properties” (i.e. higher-level ontic properties that are somehow composed of the properties of the proper parts of the object instantiating the higher level property (see e.g. Armstrong 1978, p. 69)) as strictly emergent properties (*pace* e.g. O’Connor 1994). It should be noted, though, that powers are rarely regarded as mere structural properties in the literature. They are typically supposed to be uncomposed “simple” properties, although they may be held to ontologically *depend* on the composition and property structure of the object they are instantiated by (see e.g. Molnar 2003, pp. 28, 36–37 for discussion). In any case, for essentially the same reason as the one discussed in the text below, I see no reason to postulate strictly emergent social structural powers: they would be causally redundant. Also, for completeness, I should mention that I take strict emergence to be neutral with respect to the distinction between “weak” (roughly, explainable) and “strong” (unexplainable) emergence sometimes alluded to in the literature (see e.g. Elder-Vass 2010; cf. Hansson Wahlberg 2014b).

sidering various examples from different “levels” of social reality, that there is little reason to believe in such a phenomenon in the social sphere.

Importantly, Lawson himself *denies* that there is any downward causation from wholes (exerted by their “global powers”) to proper parts in society:¹³

Downward causation is usually defined in terms of an emergent (higher-level) entity having a causal effect by way of causally impacting its own (lower-level) components. But of course, a whole cannot causally impact its own parts; it can only act through them. [...] Clearly, if a social totality exhibits powers of a sort not possessed by any of its components [*sic*], such causal powers nevertheless emerge only through the relational organisation (involving the empowerment [*sic*] of its components, *and are exercised, as mechanism or process, only through the actions of its relationally organised (human) individual components*. An Olympic Games, concert, war or industrial strike cannot be staged other than through the activities of various participants. (Lawson 2013, pp. 287, 298; my emphasis)

Thus, on Lawson’s own view, to account for the unfolding of various processes and events within communities it is in principle enough to postulate *suitably interrelated and interacting components* (individuals). Emergent causal powers at the level of communities or social systems are not needed: these “global” powers would not do any additional causal work, over and above the causal work done by the suitably interrelated components (see also Searle 2016, pp. 406–407 for a similar complaint).¹⁴

Note that these considerations also apply to mere “humdrum” social powers of social systems (i.e. not only to internalized, *prima facie*, social^E powers, which are the focus of Lawson’s discussion): *any* putative, intrinsic social power at the level of a social whole is arguably redundant given the abilities and interactions of the interrelated components. For example, the alleged social power of so-called norm circles (e.g. families and religious communities) to influence, as wholes, the normative beliefs of individual members of the circle (Elder-Vass 2010, Ch. 6) can arguably be accounted for fully by appealing to interactions among the members of the norm circle (see Hansson Wahlberg (2014b) for discussion). There is simply no need to postulate an ontic power at the level of norm circles here. And the same kind of reasoning would seem to apply to alleged social powers that involve affecting entities that are *external* to the social system in question: for example, the putative power of a group of people to

¹³ Here Lawson seems to have changed his mind: compare his (2007, p. 124).

¹⁴ Interestingly, in contrast to Lawson, Elder-Vass apparently regards loose or metaphorical locutions such as “acting through” as signifying downward causation (e.g. Elder-Vass 2010, pp. 28, 172, 2012, pp. 85–86, 88). It is unclear why though, considering the fact that Elder-Vass elsewhere clarifies that he does not think a whole has causal abilities beyond the causal powers of the proper parts when they are suitably interrelated, i.e. when they form a whole of the kind in question. As he puts it: “My argument is that (a) a set of configured interacting parts that compose a given whole at a given time, including both the parts themselves and the relations between them, is necessarily indistinguishable in terms of its causal capacities from (b) the whole itself at that same time.” (Elder-Vass 2014, p. 794) Moreover, according to Elder-Vass, when a whole “acts through” the parts, the interrelated parts “implement” the whole’s alleged causal powers (Elder-Vass 2010, p. 28). But then, in the end, the interrelated parts perform all the relevant work; the whole does not contribute with any extra causal *oomph* from a higher level. For detailed discussions and criticisms of Elder-Vass’s notions of emergence and downward causation, see Hansson Wahlberg (2014b, c).

lift a sofa or smash a shop window (cf. Petersson 2007). There is little reason to think that a social system must have an ontic, higher-level causal power if the interrelated members are to be able, collectively, to lift a sofa or smash a shop window.¹⁵

To sum up: Neither individuals nor social systems can have any intrinsic social^E causal powers, because that would be a contradiction in terms. And mere social causal powers of social systems—i.e. ontic causal properties that are instantiated at the level of a social whole but which are not social^E and consequently can coherently be taken to be intrinsic—are arguably causally redundant. Thus, there seems to be no use for Aristotelian/Harréan/Bhaskarian powers in the social realm: they are either contradictory or causally redundant entities.

Before concluding this section I should comment on Lawson’s brief remark that the *organisational structure* of a social system can exert downward causation. If structures can exert downward causation it might be hoped (as Lawson seems to suggest) that this kind of causation will involve or stem from non-redundant intrinsic social powers, and hence that there is genuine work for powers in the social realm to do after all.

Lawson says:

Along with the emergence of an entity or whole and its [redundant] “global” powers of efficient causation, emerges the entity’s organising structure. [...] Confusion arise, because, or where, emergence is used as the criterion of higher or top, in a situation in which (by this criterion) there are at least two higher-level features that might be categorised as higher- or top-level: the emergent whole and the emergent organisational structure. Top-down or downward causation is intelligible in the case of reference to the latter but not the former. (Lawson 2013, pp. 286, 287; see also Lawson 2016b, p. 431)

Introducing “structural” downward causation will not help to save social powers, however. (Unfortunately, in discussing this, I will have to rely to a large extent on my own understanding of what structural causation could involve. Lawson never quite explains how structures could exert any form of downward causation, certainly not of the powers variety. Occasionally, Lawson refers to the causation exerted by organisational structures as “formal causation” (Lawson 2013, p. 287, 2016a, p. 363), apparently alluding to the second of Aristotle’s four causes (*Physics*, book II, Ch. 3). But “formal causation” is rarely regarded as a genuinely causal concept by modern commentators on Aristotle; it is often described as picking out features of objects that help answering questions of the type “What is it?” (see e.g. Bostock 1999, p. xxvi). Arguably, it is the *third* of Aristotle’s causes—roughly, efficient causation (“...a producer causes a product and a changer causes a change”, *Physics*: 194^b29)—which has most in common with modern conceptions of cause (Bostock 1999, p. xxv), certainly of the

¹⁵ I should acknowledge that Petersson is interested primarily in power *attributions*—more specifically, in the *ordinary conceptions* of causal agency and collective activity figuring in the content of the *intentions* of individuals that we, in ordinary language, would want to describe as being engaged in a “collective action” (Petersson 2007, pp. 148, 153, 155). Moreover, according to Petersson (*ibid.*, p. 152), the appropriate level of a power attribution is usually a matter of pragmatics. So long as we are concerned with mere colloquial predication (and not with Ontology), I think this pragmatic stance regarding the level of a power attribution is perfectly acceptable: loose ability/dispositional/power talk (and thought) need not be made true by ontic, or “sparse,” powers (see footnote 3, and in particular Sect. 4 where this point is elaborated).

powers variety (see also Aristotle’s own explicit characterization of power-causation in *Metaphysics*, Theta, Ch. 5).)

First, causation involving organisational structure—i.e. objects that are *interrelated* in certain ways—does not as such necessarily involve downward causation. Clearly, causation among objects or individuals must involve “organisational structure” in some form or another. Consider Newton’s law of gravity, according to which the *distance* between massive objects cannot be ignored. Even if we were to agree that mass has an intrinsic power to attract (and be attracted to) other masses in a mathematically specifiable way (a power that would partly account for the truth of the law-statement, were it true), we would have to concede that the spatial distance between interacting masses affects the magnitude of the gravitational forces created between the bodies involved (cf. Ellis 2001, pp. 137–138; Molnar 2003, pp. 164–165). Likewise, in a society, individuals are manifestly interrelated in various ways (e.g. spatially and deontically), and these relations arguably make a difference to the way people behave (I will return to this below, Sect. 4). But the difference-making abilities of relations within a structure do not necessarily have anything to do with downward causation. The relevant relata (massive objects, individuals, and so on) may very well belong to the same level of reality (assuming here that the notion of reality being stratified into “levels” makes sense); and even if they do not, they do not, as a result, have to be related as parts and wholes to each other.¹⁶ Thus, to suggest that causation involving organisational structure is, as such, a case of downward causation is to invite confusion.

Secondly, and importantly, the relations that partly make up the structure can in any case not *themselves* be powers in the traditional sense—because, being *relations* among components, they are not monadic, intrinsic properties. Thus, being a difference maker does not entail being a power. Lawson seems to assume—erroneously—that being a difference maker *does* entail being a power. He writes, for example: “The organisation or arrangement of the bricks and other components [of a house] makes a difference. And on this criterion of causality, i.e. of possessing the *power* or ability to make a difference, the relational organisation is causal.” (Lawson 2013, p. 287, my emphasis) Being a difference maker may indeed involve being causal or causally relevant, as discussed above; but it does not need to involve being a power, as Lawson is apparently suggesting. Again, non-powers, such as relations, can “make a difference” by being entities that powers respond to in certain ways.

Thirdly, if it is held that the organisational structure as a *whole* has emergent causal powers that can be exerted downward, the exclusion argument simply reapplies: all the relevant causation (production, difference making, etc.) appears to be going on *within* the structure—adding powers that act, so to speak, “holistically” or from the

¹⁶ Note, however, that sometimes “downward causation” refers simply to macro-to-micro causation (i.e. not necessarily to wholes influencing their own proper parts). Thus, if the “nodes” in a structure belong to different levels of reality, causation within the structure could involve downward causation in this more liberal sense. However, the exclusion argument can easily be applied to such downward causation as well: arguably, in most cases the interrelated components of the higher-level node can jointly do the causal work of the higher-level node (cf. the example of the breaking of the shop window mentioned above).

“top” of the structure seems therefore to be a straightforward violation of Occam’s Razor.

Let me end this section by conceding that there is a regress argument looming here: if we reiterate the exclusion argument over and over again it seems that *all* causal powers drain away, except for those that exist at the level of elementary particles (if there is such a bottom level, see Schaffer 2003), which *prima facie* is an absurd consequence (see Block 2003; Elder-Vass 2012, 2014). However, on the assumption that there are powers at all, I do not find it evident that such a highly sparse version of the powers ontology is necessarily untenable (see e.g. Heil 2012; Bird 2016; Hansson Wahlberg 2014c for discussion). For example, I think the exclusion argument could be applied with equal force to the putative powers of many of Cartwright and Pemberton’s so-called “nomological machines”, allegedly operating at the physical meso/macro levels: their example of a toilet cistern (Cartwright and Pemberton 2013, pp. 99, 103) is an obvious case in point (see also Elder-Vass’s 2012, p. 84 discussion of a torch). On the other hand, it might very well be that the regress stops before the fundamental level is reached, perhaps at the level of biological organisms or minds (assuming that downward causation as such is a coherent notion). The case has been made for the thesis that organisms/minds have emergent causal powers that defy the exclusion argument (see e.g. O’Connor 1994; O’Connor and Jacobs 2003; Dupré 1993; O’Connor and Wong 2005; Merricks 2001; Bird 2008; Lowe 2013; Harré 2013). Others have argued that the exclusion argument does not apply to chemical compounds (e.g. Needham 2009; Hendry 2017). And see Schaffer (2007, pp. 184–187) for a relevant discussion of emergence in the quantum realm (see also Calosi and Morganti 2016). However, I do not wish to evaluate these highly controversial claims about those specific domains here. In this paper, I am content to restrict my attention to the *social* domain; and I argue that powers in the *social realm* (be they social^E or social) are highly problematic entities we have little reason to believe in and should not postulate.

4 Diagnosis

If there is precious little room for powers in the social realm, why have philosophers and social scientists been inclined to postulate them? Here, I shall suggest three such reasons. (I should acknowledge that this section is to some extent speculative: it is hard to ascertain for sure what thought processes lie behind the problematic endorsement of social/social^E powers. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer here.)

First, talk about “abilities”, “capabilities”, “capacities” and “dispositions” may mistakenly be taken to entail, or analytically involve, ascriptions of ontic powers. Recall that Lawson expressed himself this way:

Among the global *powers* of social systems are the *abilities* to stage Olympic Games, wage wars, raise taxes, hold elections, establish international treaties, conduct strikes, form monetary unions, and so on. [...] a police officer *can* arrest suspects, a judge *can* pass a sentence, and doctors prescribe drugs. (Lawson, 2013, p. 298, my emphases)

But statements ostensibly ascribing modal properties to objects or persons need not have truth conditions that involve the existence of ontic powers—at least, not if the relevant modally loaded expressions are used in an ordinary language, rather than technical, sense (and this goes for the very word “power” as well, I think) (cf. footnote 3, above).

Arguably, the truth conditions of day-to-day statements ascribing abilities and dispositions to objects are generally, or often, merely of the following conditional form: if such and such were to happen, then such and such would (in indeterministic contexts: might) happen (cf. Ryle 1949/2002, pp. 43, 123; Mackie 1973, pp. 126–128; Lewis 1973, p. 38; Harré 2013, pp. 131, 138). The *truth-makers* for such loose statements may be a variety of things, including events in possible worlds (Lewis 1973), actual states of affairs together with laws of nature (Armstrong 1997), macro powers of interacting objects (Mumford and Anjum 2011), and powers of the relevant entities’ suitably interrelated constituents (Heil 2012; Harré 2013; Bird 2016). Consequently, loose ordinary language statements about abilities and dispositions are not, as such, ontologically committal, although they may *seem* to be, due to their grammatical form. In particular, they do not express a specific commitment to intrinsic powers inhering in the grammatical subjects of the ascriptions; and they certainly do not express a commitment to there being intrinsic powers instantiated *at the same ontological level* as the grammatical subjects.¹⁷ Accordingly, such statements are compatible with the relevant truth-makers consisting of lower-level objects and features, or objects and features that are *external* to the *prima facie* subject of the ability ascription: as just indicated, the truth-makers may involve laws of nature, external states of affairs and objects (possibly with intrinsic powers), and so on. Importantly—and typically this is not highlighted in the literature on disposition/ability ascriptions—the external factors may also include legal regulations, social–historical circumstances, and external individuals with certain attitudes towards the subject of the ascription. Thus, in this relaxed sense there can clearly be “extrinsic dispositions”, “extrinsic abilities” or even “extrinsic powers”: i.e. there can be true ascriptions of disposition/ability/power *predicates* which are made true by factors external to the grammatical subject. But the idea that there are extrinsic dispositions/abilities/powers in this relaxed or “abundant” sense does not entail that there are extrinsic powers in the technical, ontic, sparse sense. [Cf. Bird’s (2007, pp. 29–31, 125) discussion of McKittrick’s (2003).]

¹⁷ Advocates of social powers often state that the *implementation* of the relevant social power occurs at a level below the grammatical subject, i.e. that the causal *mechanism* is to be found at the level of interrelated individuals (e.g. Lawson 2013, p. 298; Elder-Vass 2010, pp. 23–26, p. 28, 173; 2012, p. 88). They nevertheless want to ascribe social abilities and powers to social entities as *wholes*. I suggest that this move (involving the postulation of redundant higher-level powers) is partly motivated, or illicitly influenced, by colloquial speech: in ordinary language, we habitually ascribe ability/disposition/power *predicates* to social wholes. For example, the examples mentioned by Lawson above seem to be imported from ordinary language more or less straight off (consider also the examples in footnote 7). Such ascriptions (when read non-technically) can be true although there are no ontic powers at the social level. (I would give the same verdict regarding many of the physical examples employed by defenders of social powers: consider Lawson’s example of a house (2013, pp. 286–287) or Elder-Vass’s (2012, p. 84) example of a torch; cf. Searle’s (2016) criticism of Lawson.)

It is true that this simple conditional analysis of disposition/ability ascriptions has been called into question in connection with scenarios involving masks, finks and antidotes (e.g. Martin 1994), and that it has been concluded, in the light of such scenarios, that such ascriptions should after all be taken to involve the postulation of intrinsic powers (ibid., Molnar 1999). However, I think it is plausible to assume that the ascriptions are implicitly associated with some qualifying “*ceteris paribus*”, “in ideal conditions” or “absent intervening factors” clause (cf. Hansson Wahlberg 2009). That would arguably save the conditional analysis from the alleged counter-examples. Besides, as I have highlighted elsewhere (Hansson 2006), the ontic powers interpretation of disposition ascriptions faces a serious problem of its own which the conditional analysis escapes: the powers account cannot explain certain entailment relations which intuitively connect some ability and disposition ascriptions, and these relations *can* be straightforwardly explained within the conditional analysis. For example: if “sugar is water-soluble” (or the proposition expressed by the sentence, or the statement made when the sentence is tokened) is true, intuitively it follows that “water is a solvent for sugar” is true, and vice versa. On the conditional analysis, such entailments can be explained easily: the relevant ability ascriptions have the *same* truth condition, namely: *if some sugar were put in water, it would dissolve*. (Or, to use an example inspired by Lawson’s putative positional abilities: If doctors can (or have the ability to) prescribe drugs to patients, then intuitively, patients can (or have the ability to) be prescribed drugs by doctors. An ordinary language statement expressing either sort of ability seems to have a truth condition with roughly the following conditional structure: *if a doctor were to fill in and sign a document of certain kind, then the patient referred to in the document would be prescribed a drug (of the kind specified in the document in question)*.) But notice that on the powers semantics, the entailment does *not* hold, because on that understanding “water is a solvent for sugar” can be true without “sugar is water-soluble” being true, and vice versa. On the powers semantics, the ascriptions have distinct truth conditions involving distinct powers inhering in distinct objects, and one of the subjects may very well lack the relevant ontic power.¹⁸

¹⁸ It is sometimes suggested that a power typically need a “mutual manifestation partner” to (jointly) cause an effect, and hence that powers typically do operate in tandem with some other power(s) (see e.g. Mumford and Anjum 2011, p. 34). On the classical version of this view, “active powers” co-operate with “passive powers” or “liabilities” to produce the effect (see e.g. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, book Theta; Locke 1689/2004, p. 220; Harré and Madden 1975, p. 89). Note, however, that this kind of view is usually defended as a *metaphysical* thesis, not a thesis about the *semantic analysis* of dispositional predication. The mutual-manifestation-partner view does not follow from the powers semantics as such. The powers semantics is compatible with only *one* of the ascriptions being true. For example, on the powers semantics, it might be true that water is a solvent for sugar, because water does indeed have an ontic power to dissolve sugar (an active power), although it is false that sugar is water-soluble, because sugar *lacks* the relevant (passive) ontic power. This will be the case if sugar has only categorical properties or powers to do things other than dissolving in water. Thus, the power in water may be a power to act—i.e. to dissolve sugar—when these categorical properties/powers are present, which are then mere “difference makers”. This asymmetric situation cannot be excluded by semantic considerations alone (see Hansson 2006 and Hansson Wahlberg ms). However, on the conditional analysis, by analytic necessity, if water is a solvent for sugar then sugar is water-soluble (and vice versa). And similarly, on the conditional analysis, by analytic necessity, if doctors have the ability to prescribe drugs to patients, then patients have the ability to be prescribed drugs by doctors (and vice versa).

Thus, all in all, I think the standard, ontologically non-committal, conditional analysis of ordinary ability and disposition statements has a lot going for it. *An obvious benefit is that this analysis allows ability ascriptions to the social realm to be true—ascriptions that would be false, or at least highly problematic, on the intrinsic powers account.* This notwithstanding, many social scientists and philosophers are, it seems, implicitly adopting the powers reading of such ascriptions. (A notable exception is Lindahl and Reidhav 2017, p. 162 who adopt a conditional analysis). It may be that at least some of them are misled by surface grammar, and perhaps, in some cases, by certain philosophical (and in my view erroneous) doctrines relating to the interpretation of ability/dispositional statements.¹⁹

Secondly, some defenders of powers in the social realm seem to have conflated socially^E grounded “constitutive” abilities (an alternative name would be “performative” abilities, cf. Austin 1962) with causal powers. For example, recall that Lawson mentioned, as examples of powers, abilities of social systems to raise taxes, establish international treaties, and monetary unions, but also abilities of individual persons (police officers, judges and doctors) to arrest suspects, pass sentences, and prescribe drugs (for similar examples, see Harré 1970, p. 92; Harré and Madden 1975, p. 95; Elder-Vass 2010, pp. 73, 173, 199, 2012, pp. 87, 89). Many of these abilities are, I think, first and foremost constitutive in nature (cf. Searle 1969, 1995; Goldman 1970; Smith 2014). Consider, for example, a national governmental body with the ability (the putative power) to establish international treaties. By signing a certain document, the governmental body does not *cause* the establishment of the relevant international treaty. Rather, the act, in the relevant context (along with other acts such as the signing of the document by other appropriately authorised parties), *is* or *constitutes* the establishment of the treaty. Of course, the actual writing process is (at some level) a physical, causal process; but this process (or rather the end stage of it), which more or less anyone who can write can reproduce, non-casually *constitutes* the establishment of the treaty in the context in question. As John Searle would put it, in the societal context in question, the act *counts*—in line with his general formula for constitutive rules: X counts as Y in context C (Searle 1969, pp. 34–35; 1995, pp. 43–44)²⁰—as

¹⁹ Much of what Daniel Little says in his recent book about social powers and their microfoundations (Little 2016, especially Ch. 6) would become less perplexing if he explicitly and firmly adopted the distinction defended above between mere true dispositional predications (abundant “properties”) and ontic powers (sparse properties). He writes, for example: “On this standpoint, powers are attributions we make to things when we don’t know quite enough about their composition to work out the physics or sociology of the underlying mechanisms. They do attach to the entity or structure in question, surely enough; but they do so in virtue of physical or sociological composition of the entity, not of some inherent metaphysical property” (p. 199). The view expressed here is actually quite similar to a view, defended by Prior et al. (1982, p. 256), according to which mere “dispositions” (second-order properties, according to them) need causal bases (e.g. ontic powers) at some lower level. But a few pages later Little says: “And, we might seek to demonstrate that all causal powers depend on combinations of these sorts of ‘primitive’ causal powers—a kind of Hobbesian materialism. But this is needlessly strenuous from a metaphysical point of view. Better to consider the *middle-level range of powers* and mechanisms where we are able to move upward and downward in our search for underlying causal mechanisms and *supervening causal powers*” (ibid., p. 204, my emphases). Little also fails to notice that many of the putative meso-level powers discussed in the philosophy of social science literature are not intrinsic to their bearers.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of Searle’s theory, see Hansson Wahlberg (2014a).

the establishment of the treaty (Alvin Goldman, 1970, pp. 25–26, would say that the act involves “conventional generation”).²¹

Likewise, if a doctor fills in a form to prescribe a drug, she does not thereby cause the prescription of the drug. The act in question is or constitutes the prescription of the drug. And when a policeman grabs a suspect while declaring “You’re under arrest!”, the act does not cause the arrest—it is or constitutes the arrest. The same holds, I would argue, for many of the other putative powers, such as the ability of a governmental body to raise taxes, the ability of a university to assign grades, the ability of a judge to pass sentences, the ability of a manager to fire an employee, and so on.

That we are not dealing with causal powers here is indicated—apart from the obvious extrinsic, conventional grounding of the abilities—by the fact that the relevant “acts” and their putative “effects”, were they genuinely causal, would in many cases violate the actual speed-limit to causal propagation, i.e. the speed of light (see e.g. Salmon 1984, p. 141).²² Consider, for example, the act of grading. When a student is assigned a grade, the student acquires the grade (i.e. the “property” of having such and such a grade, the putative “effect”) as soon as the official grading (the putative “cause”, fundamentally, the inscribing of some marks on a piece of paper, or something similar) has occurred, irrespective of the student’s whereabouts. The student may have travelled to the other side of the earth, and still “acquire” the grade at the relevant time. Similar situations obtain when a criminal is sentenced (although in such a case the distance will typically be shorter), an employee is fired, an academic is promoted to professor, a citizen’s taxes are raised, and so on. Better, I think, to conceive of such putative “effects” as instances of non-causal, so-called “mere Cambridge changes”: a *predicate* (expressing an abundant extrinsic “property”) begins to apply to a certain person (or a group of people) at a certain time simply in virtue of changes or events that take place elsewhere at that time (see e.g. Kim 1974; Shoemaker 1980/1997; Mellor 1998, pp. 87–88). In the case of grading: a physical act that counts as an official grading of person x occurs at place p and time t , whereby a predicate of the form “ x has acquired grade Φ ” becomes true of x (i.e., it becomes an institutional truth or fact that x has acquired grade Φ at t), although x exists at distinct place p' at time t .

Thus, ascriptions of such abilities (to establish international treaties, raise taxes, assign grades, arrest suspects, pass sentences, and so on) to social entities and individuals ought not, as such, to be taken as attributions of causal powers (beyond the required, underlying physical powers). Again, it seems more appropriate to understand

²¹ Compare, in a paper on performatives in general Searle says: “In order intentionally to produce changes in the world through our actions, normally our bodily movements have to set off a chain of ordinary physical causation. If, for example, I am trying to hammer a nail into a board or start the car, my bodily movements [...] will cause the desired effect. But there is an important class of actions where intention, bodily movement and desired effect are not related by physical causation in this way. If somebody says, ‘The meeting is adjourned,’ ‘I pronounce you husband and wife,’ ‘War is declared,’ or ‘You’re fired,’ he may succeed in changing the world in the ways specified in these utterances just by performing the relevant speech acts. [...] As a general point, the difference between pounding a nail and adjourning a meeting is that in the case of adjourning the meeting the intention to perform the action, as manifested in the appropriately bodily movement (in this case the appropriate utterances) performed by a person duly authorized, and recognized by the audience, is constitutive of bringing about the desired change.” (Searle 1989, pp. 547–548).

²² See also Hansson Wahlberg (2017a) in which I argue in detail against Mumford and Anjum’s theory of simultaneous power-causation (Mumford and Anjum 2011, Ch. 5).

these ability ascriptions in line with the conditional analysis. For example, to say that a judge x has an ability to pass a sentence, is to say, roughly, that if x were to do y , a sentence would be passed. No social^E causal power is hereby ascribed to the judge (which would be a contradiction in terms), only a “constitutive” ability, which is held relative to a certain societal context in which a judge’s doing y counts, by convention, as a sentence being passed.

Thirdly, and relatedly, some defenders of powers in the social realm seem occasionally to illicitly equate causal powers with so-called *deontic powers* (sometimes labelled positive and negative conventional powers, or, in legal literature, legal powers and liabilities)—that is, with rights, privileges, entitlements, obligations, responsibilities, duties, etc. (see e.g. Searle 1995, p. 100, 2010, pp. 8–9; Hohfeld 1913). Consider Lawson again, who says:

...an individual allocated to the position university professor, acquires the social/positional identity of (is accepted within a community as possessing the status of) university professor; and so on. [...] a position is essentially a locus of a set of specific rights and obligations, where the accepted position occupants are agents or bearers of these rights and obligations and typically possess a status or identity associated with them. But any given position is always constituted in relation to others. And the rights of individuals in one group over individuals in another are *matched* by obligations of the latter group members with respect to the former. [...] If positional rights and obligations ultimately relate to ways in which certain positioned individuals can influence the behaviour of others, it follows that rights and obligations are in effect positional *powers*, respectively positive and negative powers. For the agents of rights (positive powers) have the causal capacity intentionally to get others, the subjects of those rights (those with relevant obligations, or negative powers), *to do something whether the latter want to do that something or not*. (Lawson 2013, pp. 292–293, emphases original; see also Elder-Vass 2010, pp. 153, 159)

However, as Searle stresses, deontic powers are extrinsic (1995, pp. 9–13, 100–101, 104–112), while causal powers are, as we have seen, intrinsic. Deontic powers are generally *assigned* to persons (or groups or other entities) via laws or other regulations, or simply through people’s acceptance of the assignment. Causal powers, on the other hand, are had by objects in virtue of their intrinsic nature (e.g. Harré 1970, p. 85; Bhaskar 1975/2008, p. 231; see fn. 4 for further references). For this reason, Searlean deontic powers and Aristotelian/Harréan/Bhaskarian causal powers cannot be equated.²³

²³ Cf. Hohfeld, who pointed out more than a hundred years ago: “it is necessary to distinguish carefully between the *legal* power [and] the *physical* power to do the things necessary for the ‘exercise’ of the legal power” (Hohfeld 1913, p. 52, emphases original). And Searle: “[...] let us say that all deontic status-functions are matters of *conventional power*. This terminology enables us to distinguish conventional power from brute physical power, even though of course the two often go hand in hand; because often the point of giving conventional power is to authorize the use of brute physical power” (Searle 1995, p. 100, emphasis original). Surprisingly, in his recent commentary on Lawson, Searle (2016) does not explicitly discuss this crucial distinction between deontic and causal powers (although see (ibid., p. 411) for some brief remarks about function and physical realization).

If Lawson and likeminded people nevertheless want to insist that deontic powers are a species of intrinsic causal power, they will have to adopt the community move involving strictly emergent properties discussed in Sect. 3. However, that would make whole communities the bearers of the relevant “negative” and “positive” powers, and not the individuals/sub-systems therein. I do not think much sense can be made of such a proposal. For one thing, as Lawson himself stresses, “the rights of individuals in one group over individuals in another are *matched* by obligations of the latter group members with respect to the former” (2013, pp. 292–293, see also Hohfeld 1913, p. 30). This characteristic and crucial feature of deontic powers will be lost if only whole communities are agents of deontic powers. That is, it will no longer be strictly true to say that:

If university teachers have the right to set exams, students have the obligation to sit them, just as students have the right to expect the exams to be marked, and fairly, and teachers have an obligation to undertake this. (Lawson 2013, p. 293)

The community move for equating deontic and causal powers will also have to involve downward causation, and I have argued that causation of this kind is redundant unless the emergent powers of communities can somehow causally intervene and produce new behaviours of the interrelated individuals in the society in question—an idea which seems highly questionable. Finally, the community move in any case faces the obvious objection that deontic and causal powers clearly seem to be distinct inasmuch as deontic powers are normative while causal powers appear to be utterly devoid of normativity. All in all, then, I think deontic and causal powers should be kept distinct.

My denial that deontic powers are causal powers does not entail that the former—apart from their enabling constitutive abilities²⁴—have no causal relevance in a society, i.e. make no causal difference at all. My argument is simply that being causally relevant does not necessarily mean being a power, not even on a powers metaphysics. Recall the discussion of Newtonian gravitation in Sect. 3: we saw there that, even if massive objects have a power to attract one another,²⁵ the magnitude of the ensuing accelerations (absent disturbing factors) also depends on how far apart the powerful objects are. Hence, their distance is, in some sense, causally relevant: it makes a difference to how strongly the mass-powers interact. But again, spatial separation need not itself be a power to make such a difference. (Indeed, distance is a relation, and is typically not regarded as a power in the literature; see e.g. Ellis 2001, pp.137–138.) Plausibly, this kind of causal relevance or difference making can be expressed by a counterfactual: had the distance differed, the resulting gravitational force on the

²⁴ A legislative body has the “ability” to legislate (i.e. if the relevant persons that make up the legislative body were to act in a certain way, a law would be passed, but not caused), and arguably it “has” this constitutive ability partly in virtue of having the *mandate* or *right* to legislate (which might be a legal right, or more specifically, a legal *privilege*, see Hohfeld 1913, pp. 34–36).

²⁵ I use this example for illustrative purposes only. I am well aware that Newtonian gravitation has given way to Einstein’s curved space–time, which contains no gravitational forces.

objects would have been different.²⁶ However, the truth-maker for this counterfactual could simply involve the nature of the relevant mass-powers: how *they* react to increasing/diminishing distance (cf. Chakravartty 2007, pp. 144–147). The situation may be similar, I suggest, with rights and obligations (within obvious limits!). That is, people may be inclined—perhaps in virtue of their intrinsic ontic causal powers, if they instantiate such properties—to react to rights and obligations in certain ways in certain contexts without these rights and obligations themselves being powers. (In a contrast with spatial relations, rights and obligations appear to be even less ontologically robust and objective, being mere institutional or conventional “entities” which are existentially dependent on human actions and attitudes.) Thus, without being causal powers, deontic powers may nevertheless be “causally relevant” in the sense that they “make a difference” to how people behave, plausibly indirectly by being represented and taken into account in people’s decision making: were the deontic powers distributed differently, people would (generally) make other decisions and act differently (cf. Searle 2001). But again, the truth of this counterfactual does not entail that deontic powers are causal powers.²⁷

5 Conclusion

Philosophers and social scientists have become increasingly eager to apply the powers ontology to the social domain. I have argued that this application is misguided—powers in the social realm are either contradictory or redundant entities—and is based on a number of mistakes and conflation. Alleged social causation had better be conceptualized in other terms.

Acknowledgements This paper was presented at the Higher Seminar in Theoretical Philosophy at Lund University, November 2016, at an *eidós* seminar at the University of Neuchâtel, May 2017, at the ENSO V conference at Lund University, August 2017, and at the Higher Seminar in Philosophy at Linköping University, December 2017. Many thanks to the audiences for valuable feedback. I am also grateful to Åsa Burman for reading and commenting on the whole manuscript and to two anonymous reviewers for *Synthese* for their insightful and constructive comments. The writing of the paper was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Grant Number P15-0744:1.

²⁶ I would deny, however, that counterfactual dependence is in general a sufficient condition for causality, or for causal relevance or causal difference making. Examples of counterfactual dependences which are not causal are famously given by Kim (1973). To the list, I would add *socially constitutive* counterfactuals of the type, “Had the national governmental body not signed the document, the international treaty would not have been established”, “Had the judge not passed the sentence, the criminal would not have been convicted”, etc.; cf. above.

²⁷ Åsa Andersson (2007, p. 149) firmly distinguishes between deontic powers and brute, intrinsic causal powers. This is a clear strength of her account. However, she also holds that deontic powers are a species of “social powers” and says: “An agent *A* has social power if and only if *A* has an ability, which is existentially dependent on collective intentionality, to effect a specific outcome” (p. 154). The term “effect” here suggests that deontic powers are, in some sense, causal. Also, Andersson holds that “power” (and I assume “ability”) should be taken as a “dispositional concept” (p. 144) expressing a “capacity” (ibid), and this, together with her claim that abilities effect outcomes, makes her deontic powers dangerously similar to Harréan causal powers, albeit extrinsic ones. This apparent tension in the account would be relieved, I think, if Andersson (now Burman) were to explicitly adopt the non-committal, liberal view of dispositional concepts and the conception of causal relevance defended here.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Andersson, Å. (2007). *Power and social ontology*. Malmö: Bokbox Publications.
- Archer, M. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aristotle. (1998). *The metaphysics*, translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin Books.
- Aristotle. (1999). *Physics*, translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Armstrong, D. M. (1978). *Universals and scientific realism Vol. II: A theory of universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armstrong, D. M. (1997). *A world of states of affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barker, S. (2013). The emperor's new metaphysics of powers. *Mind*, 122(487), 605–653.
- Bhaskar, R. (1975/2008). *A realist theory of science*. London: Verso.
- Bhaskar, R. (1979/1998). *The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Bird, A. (2007). *Nature's metaphysics: Laws and properties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bird, A. (2008). Causal exclusion and evolved emergent properties. In R. Groff (Ed.), *Revitalizing causality: Realism about causality in philosophy and social science, 2008*. New York: Routledge.
- Bird, A. (2016). Overpowering: How the powers ontology has overreached itself. *Mind*, 125(498), 341–383.
- Block, N. (2003). Do causal powers drain away? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXVII(1), 133–150.
- Bostock, D. (1999). Introduction. In *Aristotle physics*, translated by Waterfield R., Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bunge, M. (1996). *Finding philosophy in social science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Calosi, C., & Morganti, M. (2016). Humean supervenience, composition as identity and quantum holes. *Erkenntnis*, 81(6), 1173–1194.
- Cartwright, N. (1983). *How the laws of physics lie*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cartwright, N. (1999). *The dappled world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cartwright, N., & Pemberton, J. (2013). Aristotelian powers: Without them, what would modern science do? In R. Groff & G. Greco (Eds.), *Powers and capacities in philosophy: The new aristotelianism, 2013*. New York: Routledge.
- Chakravartty, A. (2007). *A metaphysics for scientific realism: Knowing the unobservable*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cotnoir, A. J., & Baxter, L. M. (Eds.). (2014). *Composition as Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dupré, J. (1993). *The disorder of things*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Elder-Vass, D. (2010). *The causal power of social structures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elder-Vass, D. (2012). Top-down causation and social structures. *Interface Focus*, 2(1), 82–90.
- Elder-Vass, D. (2014). Redescription, reduction and emergence: A response to Tobias Hansson Wahlberg. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44(6), 792–797.
- Ellis, B. (2001). *Scientific essentialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fine, K. (1999). Things and their parts. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 23(1), 61–74.
- Goldman, A. I. (1970). *A theory of human action*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Greene, B. (2011). *The hidden reality*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Groff, R. (2011). Getting past Hume in the philosophy of social science. In McKay P, Russo F, Williamson J (Eds.), *Causality in the sciences*, Oxford Scholarship Online.
- Hansson, T. (2006). Too many dispositional properties. *SATS-Nordic Journal of Philosophy*, 7(2), 37–42.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2009). 4-D objects and disposition ascriptions. *Philosophical Papers*, 38(1), 35–72.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2014a). Institutional objects, reductionism and theories of persistence. *dialectica*, 68(4), 525–562.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2014b). Elder-Vass on the causal powers of social structures. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44(6), 774–791.

- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2014c). Causally redundant social objects: Rejoinder to Elder-Vass. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44(6), 798–809.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2017a). Meso-level objects, powers, and simultaneous causation. *Metaphysica*, 18(1), 107–125.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2017b). Why the social sciences are irreducible. *Synthese*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1472-2>.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. ms., Active powers and passive powers—Do causal interactions require both?
- Harré, R. (1970). Powers. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 21(1), 81–101.
- Harré, R. (1997). Is there a basic ontology for the physical sciences? *dialectica*, 51(1), 17–34.
- Harré, R. (2013). Powerful particulars revisited. In R. Groff & G. Greco (Eds.), *Powers and capacities in philosophy: The new aristotelianism, 2013*. New York: Routledge.
- Harré, R., & Madden, E. H. (1975). *Causal powers: A theory of natural necessity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Heil, J. (2012). *The universe as we find it*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hendry, R. F. (2017). Prospects for strong emergence in chemistry. In M. P. Paoletti & F. Orilia (Eds.), *Philosophical perspectives on downward causation, 2017* (pp. 146–163). London: Routledge.
- Hohfeld, W. N. (1913). Some fundamental legal conceptions as applied to judicial reasoning. *The Yale Law Journal*, 23(1), 16–59.
- Hulswit, M. (2006). How causal is downward causation? *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 36(2), 261–287.
- Ingthorsson, R. (2002). Causal production as interaction. *Metaphysica*, 3(1), 87–119.
- Johansson, I. (1989/2004). *Ontological investigations: an inquiry into the categories of nature, man and society*. Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.
- Kaidesoja, T. (2013). *Naturalizing critical realist social ontology*. London: Routledge.
- Kim, J. (1973). Causes and counterfactuals. *Journal of Philosophy*, 70(17), 570–572.
- Kim, J. (1974). Noncausal Connections. *Noûs*, 8(1), 41–52.
- Kim, J. (1999). Making sense of emergence. *Philosophical Studies*, 95, 3–36.
- Lawson, T. (1997). *Economics and reality*. New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. (2013). Emergence and social causation. In R. Groff & G. Greco (Eds.), *Powers and capacities in philosophy: The new aristotelianism, 2013*. New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. (2016a). Comparing conceptions of social ontology: Emergent social entities and/or institutional facts? *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 64(4), 359–399.
- Lawson, T. (2016b). Some critical issues in social ontology: Reply to John Searle. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 64(4), 426–437.
- Lewis, D. (1973). *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lewis, D. (1986). *On the plurality of worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lindahl, L., & Reidhav, D. (2017). Legal power: The basic definition. *Ratio Juris*, 30(2), 158–185.
- Little, D. (2016). *New directions in the philosophy of social science*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Locke, J. (1689/2004). *An essay concerning human understanding*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lowe, E. J. (2013). The will as a rational free power. In R. Groff & G. Greco (Eds.), *Powers and capacities in philosophy: The new aristotelianism, 2013*. New York: Routledge.
- Mackie, J. L. (1973). *Truth, probability and paradox*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Marmorodoro, A. (2017). Aristotelian powers at work: Reciprocity without symmetry in causation. In J. D. Jacobs (Ed.), *Causal Powers* (pp. 57–76). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, C. B. (1994). Dispositions and Conditionals. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 44(174), 1–8.
- McKittrick, J. (2003). A case for extrinsic dispositions. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81(2), 155–174.
- Mellor, D. H. (1998). *Real Time II*. London: Routledge.
- Merricks, T. (2001). *Objects and persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merricks, T. (2005). Composition and vagueness. *Mind*, 114(455), 615–637.
- Molnar, G. (1999). Are dispositions reducible? *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 50(194), 1–17.
- Molnar, G. (2003). *Powers: A study in metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mumford, S. (2004). *Laws in Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Mumford, S., & Anjum, R. L. (2011). *Getting causes from powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Needham, P. (2009). Reduction and emergence: A critique of Kim. *Philosophical Studies*, 146(1), 93–116.
- O'Connor, T. (1994). Emergent properties. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31(2), 91–104.
- O'Connor, T., & Jacobs, J. D. (2003). Emergent individuals. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 53(213), 540–555.
- O'Connor, T., & Wong, H. Y. (2005). The metaphysics of emergence. *Noûs*, 39(4), 658–678.
- Petersson, B. (2007). Collectivity and circularity. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 104(3), 138–156.

- Porpora, D. V. (2008). Sociology's Causal Confusion. In R. Groff (Ed.), *Revitalizing causality: Realism about causality in philosophy and social science, 2008*. New York: Routledge.
- Prior, E. W., Pargetter, R., & Jackson, F. (1982). Three theses about dispositions. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 19(3), 251–257.
- Ryle, G. (1949/2002). *The concept of mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Salmon, W. C. (1984). *Scientific explanation and the causal structure of the world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2003). Is there a fundamental level? *Noûs*, 37(3), 498–517.
- Schaffer, J. (2007). From nihilism to monism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 85(2), 175–191.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1989). How performatives work. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 12(5), 535–558.
- Searle, J. R. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. London: Penguin Books.
- Searle, J. R. (2001). *Rationality in action*. The MIT Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2010). *Making the social world: The structure of human civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2016). The limits of emergence: Reply to Tony Lawson. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 64(4), 400–412.
- Shoemaker, S. (1980/1997). Causality and properties. In D. H. Mellor, A. Oliver (Eds.), *Properties* (pp. 228–254). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smid, J. (2017). *Parthood, identity, and composition—studies of mereology*, doctoral dissertation, Lund University, Lund: Media-Tryck.
- Smith, B. (2014). Document acts. In A. Konzelmann-Ziv, H. B. Schmid (Eds.), *Institutions, emotions and group agents. Contributions to social ontology* (pp. 19–31). Dordrecht: Springer.