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# Theoretical procedures and Elder-Vass' critical realist ontology<sup>1</sup>

Leonidas Tsilipakos

**Abstract:** This article scrutinizes some theoretical procedures prevalent in the philosophy of social science. These procedures are exemplified in Elder-Vass' critical realism which promises to place the social sciences on a sound ontological footing. The article focuses on how Elder-Vass' general emergentist ontology is constituted and on the methods through which it is applied to society. It is contended that the ontology is not and could not be grounded in science, and that its philosophical use distorts what it is applied to. The incoherent methods that social ontological projects constitutionally rely on entail that they cannot ground social scientific explanation.

Imagine someone's saying: "All tools serve to modify something. Thus a hammer modifies the position of a nail, a saw the shape of a board, and so on." —And what is modified by a rule, a glue pot, and nails?—"Our knowledge of a thing's length, the temperature of the glue, and the solidity of a box." —Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions? — (Wittgenstein, PI §14)

For if a philosopher allows himself only an artificially limited set of logical cupboards and pigeon-holes, then when he finds that a lot of his belongings will not readily fit into them, he is tempted to solve his storage-problem by high-handed devices. Either he *deems* his articles to be of the required sizes and shapes or, if intellectual scruples forbid this, he *deems* his cupboards and pigeon-holes to contain just those secret shelves and interior compartments which will afford the required fit...' (Ryle, 2009 [1950]: 252)

## Introduction

These two quotations from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle describe potential problems associated with some of the techniques for doing philosophy, but also, and no less recognizably so, with the ways of doing theoretical sociology, for the latter is equally concerned with the use of categories and classificatory concepts.

At first blush it seems there is no reason why this should not be the case, as is there no reason why associating these techniques with problems does anything to undermine them. Categorization procedures leading to *conceptual systematization* are standard, respectable scientific procedures for organising materials in, at the very least, methodologically and theoretically useful ways. It may be conceded thus without much consternation that such procedures are not foolproof and that they may potentially misfire when not carefully carried through. Any arising difficulties are, nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> This article will soon appear in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. This version is the initial draft submitted to the journal on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, 2012.

rather sporadic, well understood, and could in no way discredit the general validity and potential fruitfulness of these procedures.

After more careful reflection, however, these rather cautious remarks do not seem appropriate when intended as a description of what philosophers and social theorists are up to and/or when thought of as an adequate response to the concerns that Ryle and Wittgenstein might be raising. Why this is the case is difficult to establish through argument abstracted from the detail and rationale pertaining to the application of such procedures in particular cases, no less so because those who employ such procedures wish to associate them with science in the strongest sense, so that to attack them must imply attacking science. Through this association, if not identification, such ways of proceeding recommend themselves as the ones one *must* adopt, on pain of irrationality. Why the procedures I will be examining in this article do not, in fact, constitute *bona fide* scientific methods is then difficult to establish for the additional reason that so much is invested in them, indeed sometimes the legitimacy of a whole discipline hinges on their own legitimacy, in short, they often appear as unassailable.

In what follows, I shall examine some materials that might serve to bring these remarks of Ryle and Wittgenstein into sharp relief, but, somewhat more importantly, the materials will hopefully be illuminated as well. Specifically, I will be focusing on one of the latest and more sophisticated versions of critical realism, one propounded by Dave Elder-Vass (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2010), which promises to place the social sciences on a sound ontological footing by demonstrating that a general emergentist ontology of the natural world is also applicable to society.

Since the form of scientific explanation critical realism recommends is one in terms of causal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1975; cf. Bunge, 1997; 2004 and Demetriou, 2007) particular events are held to be explained once the causal mechanisms and powers at play are identified. If the natural sciences explain natural phenomena in this way, then it stands to reason that a social ontology which correctly identifies the components of the mechanisms and the emergent powers producing social phenomena can increase the explanatory power of the social sciences.

Thus, what Elder-Vass' social ontology is essentially offering is a foundation for social scientific explanation in the methodical subsumption of regional concepts (ones relevant to the study of society) under the causal mechanism components sketched by the general emergentist ontology. For example, as a first step to cataloguing the kinds of causal powers which are operative in the social world, Elder-Vass argues for the

exclusive causal powers of social structures (focusing on norm circles and organisations) by identifying the latter as entities, with parts whose organisation gives rise to the causal powers in question.

If we are interested in understanding and evaluating this latest version of critical realism we are presented with two possibilities. One has to do with the project's procedures. The other has to do with its overall payoff, i.e. our being able to explain what we could not explain before (as thoroughly or as comprehensively). Although the latter route will not be considered here, let it be noted as an interesting feature of this project, and of most social theoretical projects, that the claim that it should hinge on its payoff is problematic, for such a payoff tends to remain a promissory note for future research to make good on. What I intend to argue here will only scrape the surface of why this is the case.

In this article I wish to take the former route of focusing on 'the methodology' of the project, i.e. how the general emergentist ontology is *constituted* and the methods through which it is *applied to* society. I start by questioning the alleged grounding of the general emergentist ontology in scientific examples and argue that it is not, and could not, in fact be grounded in science. While highlighting a number of procedures that ontological inquiry brings into play, the method of applying the general emergentist ontology is examined. It is contended that the ontology distorts rather than illuminates what it is applied to. Before concluding, I attempt to answer two possible objections, one which stresses the fallibility of the ontology thus claiming the right to revise its components, and another emphasizing its pragmatic justification.

To clarify the position I will be taking and forestall potential misunderstandings, it needs to be stressed that I do not intend to imply that Elder-Vass fails to meticulously apply the standards and methods he is propounding. On the contrary, one cannot but be impressed with his attempt to systematize the critical realist ontology and to refine earlier work (e.g. 2007a). The problem, in my view, lies elsewhere, namely in the ontological methods and procedures themselves. It is these methods and procedures and not Elder-Vass I intend to attack. To repeat, the point of the argument I am putting forward is not that there are some mistakes committed by theorists who fail to meet the required standards, and that once those are corrected we can progress further, nor am I offering ways of adjusting for the problems thus generated in order to uphold the objectives of the project. I am arguing that the general *and* regional ontological project and projects of a similar kind constitutionally rely on incoherent methods, and thus cannot serve as a

foundation to social scientific explanation. So much for the radical overtones of this argument for now; we might proceed to examine the materials.

### **The general emergentist ontology and its grounding in science**

The starting point of Elder-Vass' project is a general emergentist ontology providing a metaphysical position on causality couched in, what one might call, mereological terms. The core idea is that the interacting parts of a whole produce emergent properties, i.e. causal powers that belong exclusively to that whole. The elements of the general ontological scheme and how it feeds into social theory are concisely articulated in the following passage:

‘... an emergentist ontology identifies a number of *structural elements* that we would expect to find in any object of scientific enquiry: *entities*, made up of *parts* (which are themselves entities), organised by particular *relations* between the parts, and possessing *emergent properties* in virtue of these relations. In order to explain these entities, relations, and properties, we need to identify the *mechanisms* by which the parts and relations lead to the properties, the *morphogenetic causes* that bring this set of parts into this set of relations in the first place and the *morphostatic causes* that keep them so. And once we are equipped with these elements, we can go on to explain *events*, and perhaps event *regularities* or partial regularities, by showing how the emergent properties or causal powers of the entities concerned interact to co-determine actual events.’ (Elder-Vass 2010: 6)

Thus, the ontological scheme Elder-Vass is employing consists of entities and their parts, relations and emergent properties (which he uses interchangeably with causal powers). To get us to reflect on the categorial structure and as a preliminary to the points I wish to raise I will indulge in the juxtaposition of some thoughts in an uncommon key. What follows is meant to exercise our ear for sense and for the distinctions we make between different kinds of questions, so I ask that the reader excuse its unconventional character. The focus is on talking in terms of the scheme, and on its relation to scientific inquiry:

Smith has a wooden dinner table in her house; it is an old piece of furniture. Although it is quite worn out one feels it is an entity dominating the kitchen space. One can pay her a visit to find out. The dinner table in Smith's house is an object, a thing, an entity. But there would be no point in visiting her to find that out. Tables are wooden things. Tables are objects. Tables are entities.

When Smith moved into this house the table had been stored up in the attic. It lay there disassembled into five parts: four legs and the tabletop. ‘What about the screws?’, one might say. Well, yes the screws were there too. ‘Jones’ table does not have

any screws. Did you say Smith's had three legs?' No, I said four. Not all tables have the same number of parts. All tables have the same kinds of parts. Do they? Tables have parts. Entities have parts.

The first day Smith moved into the house she didn't have time to put the table together. So she just ate dinner off the tabletop. One can eat off a tabletop. One can use a tabletop as a table without attaching four legs to it. A table might consist of a table top and four legs but people eat at the table, they do not eat at a tabletop and four legs.

'Did the tabletop come in one part? Mine comes in two parts, held together by hinges.' No, the tabletop did not have any parts. 'But it is made of wood and wood is made of molecules and molecules are made of atoms.' I did not say it was not made of wood, I just said it did not have any parts. 'What if one were to use a saw?'. One could certainly make it so that the tabletop had two or more parts if they wished to. If one is up for a challenge perhaps they should try making it so that a table cannot have any parts. This, of course, is an operation of quite a different nature. XJ-310 tables do not have any parts. Tables do not have parts. Things do not have parts. Entities *cannot* have parts.

Smith's table is quite an ordinary table; it is in no way special. Science is not interested in her table. Science is not interested in tables. Tables are not an object of scientific enquiry, one might say. Engineering might be interested in tables though.

The weather is an object of scientific enquiry. Meteorology seeks to understand the weather. The weather is not an entity and it does not have parts. If only the weather were an entity with parts then science could understand it. One should remember Elder-Vass's words: 'a number of *structural elements* that we would expect to find **in** any object of scientific enquiry'. 'If only we knew were to look.' But I am tempted to say, we can look anywhere we like, as long as we find something!

A weather system is a collection of entities. How can something be a collection of entities but not be itself an entity? Entities make up wholes and these wholes are themselves entities, but sets of entities are not entities, at least not of the kind their members are.

A tropical cyclone has parts; a part of it is what we call its eye. Is its eye then an entity? A cloud formation is an entity. But then again the wind is not. Wait. The wind is not an entity, the wind is an event. 'The wind is an event?' The blowing of the wind is an event. Wait again. The wind is made of particles and those are entities. Are particles the parts of the wind? What about water vapour, air pressure and wind shear? Are these entities? If not are they then either relations or emergent properties?

We need not pursue these musings any further for they have served their purpose. Firstly, the above has hopefully given us a sense of the potential violence that speaking in terms of entities and their parts can do to our ordinary, lay but also scientific ways of speaking. Moreover, as stated, yet another purpose has been to bring into view a number of different kinds of statements we might be making in talking about entities and their parts and especially statements of the sort ‘entities have parts’ and ‘cloud formations are entities’. When the former kinds of statements are placed in the context of the general emergentist ontology they work as rules stipulating the interrelations between the concepts, they are responsible for the *constitution* of the ontological scheme. The latter type of statement, on the other hand, seems to provide for the *application* of the categories of the scheme to chosen concepts.

In order to reflect on these two concerns, that is the constitution of the scheme and its application, it will pay off to examine in more explicit terms the origin of the ontological scheme and especially Elder-Vass’ conviction that the structural elements comprising the scheme are to be found in any object of scientific investigation. Is it the case, for example, that the concepts of entity, part, relation, emergent property are used by many or most sciences or, in the same vain but perhaps somewhat more accurately, that we have a good indication that the concepts in use in a large number of scientific disciplines are *of the kinds* (and only of those kinds?) allowed for by the ontological scheme, that is concepts that scientists use to refer to entities, relations and emergent properties? Moreover, one might go one step further and wonder whether if one were to grant that this is the case, the implication would be that these are the categories that also have to work for the social world?<sup>2</sup> But let us avoid moving too fast and consider instead the claims that the emergentist ontological scheme derives from and/ or should reasonably apply to any object of scientific investigation. They are both questionable.

At first glance, there is hardly anything controversial as far as the basic claims of emergence are concerned, as they seem to derive from scientific inquiry. Emergence seems to make perfect sense when we think of water or, to switch to a chemical register, of H<sub>2</sub>O and its composition. H<sub>2</sub>O has the properties that it has because of the way its components are organised, in other words, by virtue of its molecular structure.

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<sup>2</sup> To talk about the natural and social world or about natural and social phenomena is to go some way down the road of modelling the latter on the former. But much like the social and natural world, natural phenomena and social phenomena are not two species of the same genus, not because the latter are somehow mysterious, but because the two are conceptually discontinuous. We need to keep this in mind when we employ the language of ‘world’ and ‘phenomena’.

Moreover, the chemical properties of hydrogen and oxygen that make up the water molecule are not those of the latter; H<sub>2</sub>O has different properties to its constituent elements. The example of H<sub>2</sub>O and other well-understood examples are frequently used in illustrating emergence (e.g. in Elder-Vass 2010: 17). The examples work by invoking a setting where the talk of properties and component elements has its home and thus rings true by virtue of scientific common sense. The point then seems to be that emergence is a blindingly obvious truth when it comes to the organisation of matter.

Upon careful investigation, however, the semblance of identity or at least consistency of the emergentist scheme with the concepts employed in scientific inquiry quickly disappears. Consider, for instance, the emergentist identity of properties and powers:

‘...what is meant by a *property* or *power*. A property is some intrinsic aspect of an entity that can have a causal impact on the world. I use *intrinsic* in order to exclude purely formal relations with other entities, such as ‘larger than x’, from the definition of properties. *Properties* and *powers* may therefore be regarded as synonyms’. (2010: 17).

This move removes the context of intelligibility that the setting of chemistry provided to the talk of properties, constituent elements and powers. For example, we understand very well that one of the paradigmatic uses of ‘property’ is when talking about boiling point at different levels of atmospheric pressure: boiling point is a property of H<sub>2</sub>O. But the temperature at which water turns from liquid to gas is not a *power* of water (although the fact that it can do this can be said to be one).

Further problems arise in the criterial use of the identity asserted in this passage, i.e., when we attempt to settle the question of whether something is a property by relying on the stipulated conceptual relations.<sup>3</sup> When we apply Elder-Vass’ criterion of causal impact it appears that boiling point might not be a property of water. For, embracing the definition, we are led to ask ‘Can water’s boiling point have a causal impact on the world?’ and it seems that the answer must be in the negative. However, that we tend towards understanding ‘boiling point’ *as not being* a causal power is really symptomatic of the fact that we are at a loss when it comes to answering a question we do not know what to make of. We are faced with an unintelligible or yet unspecified question, one, that is, produced by conceptual incoherence. It is, of course, possible to give a sense to the question. As doing so, however, extends beyond the offered criteria it cannot serve to

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<sup>3</sup> It is unclear whether the stipulation is meant as a restriction or an expansion, whether we are to relinquish completely or retain our understanding of properties in the way that chemistry or physics understands them but then eliminate those that cannot have a causal impact on the world. This crucially presupposes that we have some independent way of telling what can have a causal impact.



recommend them. We will see more in the next section, on why the criterial use of stipulated conceptual connections is distortive and / or inadequate.

Even if, nevertheless, there were no incoherence between the definition of the emergentist ontological scheme and the scientific examples which serve to illustrate it, the latter would still not be able to do the work that they are recruited to perform. In Sören Stenlund's (1996) polemical words "the function of the simple and 'intuitively appealing' examples given to illustrate a certain scheme is not constitutive evidence and support for the correctness and the general validity of the scheme, which is what philosophers want us to believe" (1996: 206). For what these examples, which *can* serve as constitutive of what Stenlund calls 'the grammatical scheme', do not (and could not) do is settle the range of application of the scheme. The initial feeling of self-evidence of emergentist claims quickly gives way to uncertainty regarding their scope, which is in fact left unspecified but apparently presumed to be unrestricted, for a general ontology is by definition meant to apply without restriction. Thus, although the scheme might be said to derive (in the sense that it picks some of its terms) from one or more scientific disciplines, this cannot warrant its ontological use, which is of a rather different character.

To see that the scheme's use is philosophical through and through consider what it does for us: its abstract categories do not enable us to understand and explain a particular range of phenomena; its purpose is rather different. Wittgenstein's words on the 'universal function of tools' are very pertinent here: in the same way that 'modifying' is stretched in order to apply to anything that can be called a tool the concepts of entity, relation and property – which are already quite broad as things stand – are stretched even further to potentially encompass most scientific concepts. At least that is the discernible intention at the starting point of this exercise: that all concepts should reasonably fit in this manner. What is gained by this 'assimilation of expressions' is being able to perceive the world in the greatest generality (as Wittgenstein himself answers his own question a little further down in *Philosophical Investigations*, §104).

But this generality comes at a multiple cost, that is, lack of content together with the failure to preserve intelligibility. Concerning the former, it might be considered at this initial stage whether upon application of the general scheme to a specific domain it would be a great discovery if one were to find *some* of the concepts employed in a scientific field to be concepts that can be used to refer to entities which have parts, given the extensive range of application of the concepts of 'entity' and 'part', partially extended

by the ontology itself. In fact, given the definitions that bind the elements of the ontological scheme together, it is not clear that more is needed for the scheme to apply than this first step, that is, that some concept might be described as an ‘entity-concept’. For, given that “an entity may be defined as *a persistent whole formed from a set of parts that is structured by the relations between these parts*” (Elder-Vass, 2010: 17) does it not follow *by definition* that if something is an entity then it can have parts *in some sense* which are themselves other entities, and does it not also follow truistically that these parts stand in some relation to each other? Perhaps it does, one may reply, but then the crux of emergentist claims is the question of emergent properties where a property of the whole is strictly of that whole, and such that it arises from the way the parts are organised. To this it can, in turn, be retorted that any property which is strictly of the whole will be a property that the whole has by virtue of what it is and wholes are what they are by virtue of the way their parts are put together, where again in this respect emergentists have not managed to escape tautology. To say that X would not have property Y if its parts were not organised in that way is to say that X would not have the property Y if it were not X. The scheme, thus, appears to be empty, but its emptiness does not rule out the potential violence it can do upon its application to concepts of different kinds.

### **Employing the grammatical scheme**

We have seen that the ontological scheme’s relation to science is more tenuous than might be thought, and we have reason to question whether it is a good idea to apply the scheme to concepts used to talk about society, and, even further, whether there is any significant payoff from doing so. The presumption that the scheme must apply appears questionable, and *the conceptual procedures its attempted application relies on* will be seen to be even more so.

It can be argued that embarking upon the quest for a (social) ontology brings into play a number of generic philosophical procedures that lead to confusion. The following are indicative:

a) using forms of words to ask standardised questions<sup>4</sup> without taking into account the differences between the uses of words; for example, wanting to ask the uniform question

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<sup>4</sup> This amounts to trying, *per impossible*, to substitute objective for indexical expressions (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970)

‘is X real’ while disregarding that ‘real’ (like ‘exists’) gets its sense from an implied contrasting term (cf. Austin, 1960),

b) looking at language through an ontological prism where expressions are abstracted from their circumstances of use and reflection focuses on forcing the question ‘what entity does it refer to?’ (Tsilipakos, 2012),

c) operating on simplified grammatical schemes in i) hardening a situated use of a concept into the picture providing us with its metaphysical grammar (e.g. the picture of what it is for language to refer picks one of the possible employments of ‘refer’ and turns it into a theoretical explanation of all other uses) (cf. Stenlund, 1996) and ii) stipulatively employing a set of categories to reorganise our concepts (the history of philosophy is, of course, replete with such schemes).<sup>5</sup>

. In Elder-Vass’ ontological method we can witness the use of a grammatical scheme providing us with a number of logical boxes in which to insert our concepts (procedure c-ii) — Elder-Vass himself speaks of ‘pop[ping] the concepts into the relevant ontological boxes’<sup>6</sup> (2010: 70). As sketched above, the scheme which is meant to generate a social ontology features entity/part of an entity, relation and causal power/emergent property. In the following excerpt, which is telling in more than one ways, Elder-Vass puts this procedure to use with the example of the concept of money:

Yet the social sciences are at least one step further removed from the status of ‘well-developed science’ – they consistently lack plausible, well-defined and locally consistent scientific ontologies. One of the pitfalls of the social sciences is that we may assume that they *do* have such ontologies and accept unthinkingly the sorts of ontological categorisations that appear implicit in social theories, or even in our everyday language about the social world.

For an example of the latter, consider *money*. The word is constantly used in everyday life, and frequently in the social sciences, as if money were a thing; in our terms, a type of entity. But as soon as we start to examine the ontology of money, it becomes clear that this cannot be so. For money to be a type of entity, it would have to have a characteristic type of parts, organised in a characteristic set of relations. But coins can be money, cheques can be money and electronic transfers generated by swiping credit cards can also be money. One response to this diversity of realisers of money might be to suggest it represents a family of types of entity, which include coins, cheques and credit card balances amongst others. A more plausible one, perhaps, is that being money is a *property* possessed by a variety of different types of entity, by virtue not only of their internal structure (although this does matter), but also of their relationship to certain social institutions. This would require a refinement of the portrayal of mechanisms in the previous section, since it now appears that mechanisms may rely not only on an entity’s parts and their relations to

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<sup>5</sup> Needless to say that the procedures sketched can work in a complementary or even contradictory fashion. A standardized form of words can be used to fix the general categories (entities are what exist), where the use of entity, is really understood along the lines of a material object picture. Standardized questions can be used to subsume concepts under the general categories (‘Does it exist?’, if so then it is an entity).

<sup>6</sup> Characterising these boxes as ontological rather than logical is an interesting indication of the conception at play. One perhaps obvious difference is that ontological is somehow meant to convey the intended grounding in reality, i.e., that the suggested elements somehow are the elements of reality. On the other hand, logical invokes the use of words, thus stressing language. But it would be misleading to flatly assert that what is problematic is that Elder-Vass projects a scheme taken from language onto reality. In a sense this is true, but the dichotomy between language and reality is itself part of a misconception and not an adequate remedy.

each other, but also on the relation of the whole to other entities (considering this option would be an example of what I call the metatheory test below). Alternatively, we might resolve this by concluding that money is not a property of material things like coins but rather a property of the social institution itself. I do not mean to suggest that one or the other of these paths actually does offer a viable solution to **the challenging problem of the ontological status of money**; the point of the example is only to illustrate the need for real work to answer such questions.

For the social sciences, then, **the task of determining what type of structural element any given concept might represent** is often far from trivial. On the one hand, it can be immensely difficult. The complex inter-relations between human beings, non-human physical objects, social structures and cultural or conceptual systems in the social world make it extremely challenging to disentangle the entities and properties involved, and there are many competing schools of thought on many of these questions. On the other, resolving these questions is fundamental to resolving the ontological confusion in which these disciplines find themselves. (Elder-Vass, 2010: 70)

It is instructive to follow the reasoning exhibited in the above passage. First, we can see Elder-Vass trying to make the case that the social sciences are somehow missing what the natural sciences have, namely a scientific ontology. But ‘scientific ontology’ is a rather dubious construction, projecting, as it does, metaphysics onto science. For one, if, as P.M.S. Hacker has convincingly argued (2006), the aims of philosophy and science are categorically different, no such ontological scheme could inform science in any important way, nor is any such scheme presupposed by science.<sup>7</sup> For another, if the natural sciences are capable of operating, and quite successfully so, without any ontological foundation (and *a fortiori* without an externally provided one) then this throws into doubt the need for and contribution of a foundational scheme.

Returning to the text and to the application of the general ontological scheme to the social world, we can witness how Elder-Vass, in effect, conjures up the ontological problem of money by attempting to fit the concept of money into one of the slots provided for by the ontology. Puzzlement is generated due to a perceived lack of fit, which in turn renders money as something mysterious. Here it is important to note that the puzzlement regarding money *does not exist independently* of the procedure just

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<sup>7</sup> If Elder-Vass’ claim is to derive his general ontological categories from science then this is as evident an expression of a commitment to naturalism as one might get. In light of this it is worth considering P.M.S. Hacker’s cogent remarks on the conception of a naturalized ontology, a complementary conception to the naturalized epistemology Quine pioneered, which has come to occupy a prominent position in analytic philosophy. Hacker’s own conception of what philosophical ontology, if one is interested in preserving the label, might plausibly do is also instructive: “In no ordinary sense of ‘science’ is science the sole and final arbiter on what exists (e.g. Russell’s childhood diaries, the pain in my leg, the Romantic movement, Mannerist style, international law, a plot to depose the king). There is no specific science that offers us the best theory of what exists, nor do the sciences collectively do so, for there is no such thing as a theory of everything that exists. Philosophical ontology is not concerned with determining what exists in the sense in which biological taxonomy is concerned with determining, tabulating and classifying what living things exist. Nor is it differentiated from a science, e.g. physics, by generality of categories. It is not as if physics is concerned to establish that mesons or quarks exist, whereas philosophy is concerned to establish that material objects or events exist (*pace* Davidson). The task of ontology is to clarify, from one domain to another, what it means to say that such-and such exists (e.g. a substance, a property, a possibility, a number, a concept, the meaning of a word, a law or legal system) (Hacker, 2006: 232-3)

highlighted. That is, despite Elder-Vass's attempt to saddle ordinary understanding with alleged confusion, it is obvious that most members of society are quite familiar with money and with the forms it can take, and the mere fact that they use a noun to talk about it, far from committing them to conceiving of it as a material thing, does not imply anything of the sort. No such understanding is involved in members' competence of using coins and notes, writing cheques, opening bank accounts and managing them on-line, making transfer payments and paying with a credit card when buying commodities. These are not facts that can be provided as a corrective to the ordinary conception of money, as Elder-Vass contends; on the contrary, *they constitute* the ordinary concept and conception of money. The idea then that there is a defective understanding of money as an entity with parts does not derive from ordinary practice; rather it derives from Elder-Vass's scheme which is predisposed to read its own requirements into any concept it attempts to subsume. Indeed, how strange when we come to think of it that there should be a general problem with the ontological status of money,<sup>8</sup> that somehow people have been using money for millennia while ignorant of what it is, and that this remains to be discovered.

Thus, an important feature of this ontological method is not only that our ordinary understanding of the concepts is distorted but that it is rendered irrelevant for the construction of the problem, and then relied upon when the details need to be filled in. The incoherence of this procedure throws under a dubious light the idea that an ontological foundation can allegedly ground or improve on our existing conceptual understanding when the latter seems to determine such a foundation. Ironically, the resulting difficulty of the task of popping concepts into boxes is not due to the 'complex inter-relations between human beings, non-human physical objects, social structures' as some ontological feature of the social world but is rather a product of our presumption that a concept *must* fit, which is built into the method of trying to account for nuanced concepts with a crude set of categories.

The described use of the grammatical scheme can be further illuminated by considering Gilbert Ryle's insight into this philosophical procedure. In his 1950 piece titled *Logic and Professor Anderson* Ryle offers an incisive depiction of the reasoning entailed by the employment of the ontological scheme: there Professor Anderson is employing qualities and relations as his logical boxes, and hence his reasoning takes the form 'is X a

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<sup>8</sup> This does not exclude the possibility of there being other kinds of concerns about money, i.e., its history, regarding its function in an overall economy, the regulation of its flow as a handle on the economy etc. None of these, however, are of the type raised by Elder-Vass.

quality or is it a relation?’ and ‘if X is not a quality then it *must* be a relation’. If it is not even that then it does not exist, one might add. But *our lay and scientific concepts already have a logic of their own* which is much more nuanced than any such simple scheme will allow, and restricting our logical categories is a tried and tested way of glossing over these nuances when they matter the most.

### **Objection 1: what about fallibility?**

It might reasonably be objected at this point that I have been doing Elder-Vass an injustice. For his method for social ontology does not consist in only the parts I have sketched so far and some may argue that it is significantly more sophisticated than Professor Anderson’s. Elder-Vass, it might be said, besides emphasizing that the ontology is a *fallibilist* one and thereby reserving the right to revise the set of categories, puts in place what he calls a multi-step iterative procedure<sup>9</sup> to ensure *that there is in fact a fit* between the concepts and the structural elements comprising the ontological scheme. Indeed Elder-Vass is willing to allow that there are cases where the method will partly or wholly fail us:

‘from time to time we may find that the method does not work; that the ontological structures that seem most consistent with the actual social world simply do not fit the general ontology outlined here.’ (2010: 74)

In such cases the recommendation is that we either revise the mapping of the concept onto the ontology or where that is not possible, as for example in the case of ‘mental entities’, then:

‘we may have to abandon the suggestion that all entities can ultimately be connected back to the natural world in this way, and allow for the possibility of conceptual systems that have a different kind of ontological structure’ (2010: 75)

Although when considering the above Elder-Vass’s procedure strikes us as rather sophisticated, the important point is that, like Professor Anderson, he too *uses the scheme legislatively* and *aprioristically*. Rather than constructing the scheme on the basis of an examination of our concepts and their commonalities and differences, the ontology is the requirement of the investigation and not its result. Furthermore, any use of the scheme in a legislative way creates significant tension with conceiving of the procedure as informing

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<sup>9</sup> Crudely put, the iterative procedure uses the criterion of whether the remaining logical boxes can be filled as an indication of how well a concept fits in one of the boxes.

and being dependent on *retroduction*, which crucially involves *starting from the facts*,<sup>10</sup> here the relevant facts about concept use. Yet again, the above passage casts a rather dubious light on the contribution of the procedure to our ‘ontological’ understanding. For if it is possible to have an understanding of the ‘ontological’ structures independently of the scheme then the scheme becomes somewhat redundant.

This is why, while Elder-Vass’s pronouncements that the ontology is fallibilist are an attempt to save the procedure from incoherence, they end up producing more of it. For the coherence of the notion of a *fallibilist* ontology is undermined by the use of a fallibilist *ontology*. As noted, in this case the scheme consists of the categories entity / part of an entity, relation and causal power / emergent property. But one might wonder, why start with those three categories? And why three, why not ten, why not a hundred, and indeed why presuppose that a set of categories is adequate to do justice to our concepts, and that *even further* these categories are to become fewer (Elder-Vass, 2006: 17) rather than proliferate dramatically to accommodate conceptual complexity (in which case of course one might ask why we need the categories: we might as well stick with the existing concepts!).

The fact that some *and only some* of our concepts can loosely fit a scheme with very broad categories is not something in favour of the general validity of the scheme. That the concepts making up the scheme *could* be prioritised and used to reorganise some of our other concepts is not independent evidence to support the scheme, but the product of the scheme’s application. Upon careful consideration, one finds that there are no mysteries why this is the case. To say, for example, that something is an entity or a part is to say very little. It is the understanding of the kind of entity or part it might be that enables our embedding this into any argument or explanation. To say that something is an entity or a part in the most abstract way is to make an empty statement, it is practically to say nothing.

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<sup>10</sup> Consider Lawson: “To pursue causal explanation as interpreted here, we require a mode of inference that takes us behind the surface phenomenon to its causes, or more generally from phenomena lying at one level to causes often lying at a different deeper one. This is *retroduction*. It takes us from a recognition that ‘this metal before us expands when heated’ to a conception of the metal’s intrinsic structure (or whatever) in virtue of which the metal has the power to expand when heated (Lawson, 2003: 80)” And Elder-Vass: “But it is impossible to identify mechanisms without identifying the property to be explained, the entity possessing it, and the characteristic set of parts and relations that underpin the mechanism. In other words, *retroduction* depends on filling out part of the related regional ontology. Equally, as we shall see when we come to the next type of iteration, if we want to justify the claim that properties – and thus causal powers – belong to particular entities, then we need to describe the mechanism that makes them so. The consequence is that regional ontology is also dependent upon *retroductive* theory. (Elder-Vass, 2010: 72-73)

## Objection 2: ontologies are justified pragmatically

Yet another objection might surface at this point. Elder-Vass, it might be contended, does not actually use the fact that these categories can be treated as master categories as independent justification for the scheme. Rather his position lies close to Harré's who claims that:

“...sciences are created by choosing an ontology, through the use of which phenomena are to be identified and ordered and explanations are to be constructed... in the end the choice of ontology is largely justified pragmatically – how much of the phenomena of interest does it enable us to comprehend in a fruitful and constructive way?”(1997: 178).

Like Harré, then, Elder-Vass holds that “any social ontology must ultimately be validated by empirical application” (2010: 205). But this will not do. Such a move shifts the weight of justification to the indeterminate future and away from the procedure that has, in fact, been used to come up with the ontology which itself must undergo scrutiny. Thus, to derive the scheme in an *a priori* way and then claim that its justification lies in its application is to refuse to follow one's own admissions and/or to delegate the work to others. Besides, if the proof of the pudding is in the eating then even the examples used to illustrate the scheme would need to demonstrate its effectiveness in terms of enhancing our understanding of the described phenomenon. But if one resorts to that criterion, namely, that scheme can improve our comprehension, then what we have seen so far, i.e. its emptiness and conceptual crudity is sufficient evidence to the contrary.

Finally, if the validity of the ontological scheme really hinged on its empirical application, then it would have to be possible for it to arise from specific domains where it has been proved to be fruitful. This idea, however, is incoherent as it conflates philosophy and science, by portraying ontology as a matter of scientific choice and as capable of being justified by the science. To echo Hacker (see footnote 6), it is not as if philosophy were science only at a more general level, *pace* naturalism, or as if philosophical positions were necessarily presupposed by science. Philosophy's aims are categorially different.<sup>11</sup> Philosophy is *a priori*, and as such cannot invoke scientific

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<sup>11</sup> Kivinen and Piirainen are also good at making this point in relation to the tendency to see commitment to philosophical positions everywhere: “Realists seem to assume that any activity could be meaningfully described as someone taking a realist ontological stance. For us, this does not make much sense: it seems nonsensical to claim that someone kicking a football is assuming the ball to be “existentially intransitive”. Each of us can only have our own actor's point of view on anything we do—a living, positioned, interested, involved point of view, right here and now, in the midst of our activities—and so metaphysics is practiced from a metaphysician's point of view, football is played from a football player's point of view, and social scientific inquiries are carried through from a social scientist's point of view. This is consistent with the pragmatist insight that science should be seen as just one more tool for us to cope with our



investigation in order to prove its points. Nor can it serve as an underlaborer for science. Ultimately, there is no such thing as the scientific justification of the ontological categories of entity, relation and emergent property. These are best thought of as *formal conceptual categories*, i.e. categories that can correctly or incorrectly describe types of concepts and can legitimately be invoked in the course of elucidating the conceptual apparatus employed in science or any other human activity. Such categories *could* then be justified if shown to correctly describe (parts of) the structure of concepts in question but they can do, however, no replacement or foundational work.

## Conclusion

In this article I have focused on the constitution of the ontological scheme and its application to the 'social world'. Although I have said nothing concerning the projected payoff, i.e., the explanation of social affairs once what falls under the elements of the social ontology has been catalogued, if we find that the methods the project relies on are flawed, then we have reason to question the conviction that there is significant explanatory payoff awaiting us at the end.

Indeed, it has been argued that the scheme and the procedures constitutionally associated with it fail on several counts. Firstly, the scheme is empty, being made intelligible through specific examples which cannot, however, support its general use. Moreover, due to the fact that our understanding is a product of what falls under its categories, the scheme itself adds little, if anything, to it. These observations serve to dissociate the ontological scheme from any scientific categorial one. Secondly, the ontological scheme's simplicity cannot accommodate the complexity of the kinds of concepts in lay and scientific use. Thirdly, the presumption that the scheme must apply without restriction (i.e. its ontological use) urges us to distort these concepts.

For some theorists the argument forwarded in this article may involve potential overkill. Returning to the question raised in the introduction, some might wonder whether I am not only condemning Elder-Vass' ontological scheme, but also the possibility of any *conceptual systematization*. Nothing I have said is meant to rule out such a possibility, especially when one understands systematization not as seeking to replace or ground but rather to elucidate concepts in a methodical way (see Hacker, 2007 for an

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environment, not as a picture of reality." (2004: 239). For an argument directed at critical realism see Cruickshank (2010).

exemplary study). On the other hand, I do take issue with the underlying assumption to ontological projects, especially when they are concerned with society, that there is no conceptual order in the social world, and therefore it must be introduced externally (in this case by using some scheme allegedly derived from science). One can see, for example, that Elder-Vass is in large part driven by the systematizing formalism, by the idea, that is, of applying the grammatical scheme of emergence as a way of conceptualizing and accounting for the social world, as if we somehow lacked the conceptual means to understand, talk, think clearly about, and explain social affairs. Not only do we not *in general* lack those means, so that any claim that we do needs to be substantiated, but they are sufficiently complex by being embedded in our practical life to be easily distorted when forced into a handful of categories. As we saw with the example of money, the procedures employed in the quest for a social ontology far from being capable of enhancing our understanding, are operations that restrict our movement by excluding, while implicitly relying on, the resources available to us as competent concept users.

Instead of assenting to the seeming self-evidence of ontological projects, we have no reason, then, not to question why we need to subject ourselves to mystification, and, crucially, whether there is any point in lamenting the absence of any ontological grounding for the social sciences (or for any form of investigation for that matter) when in actual fact the ontological procedures sketched above neither *do* nor *can* provide any such grounding.

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