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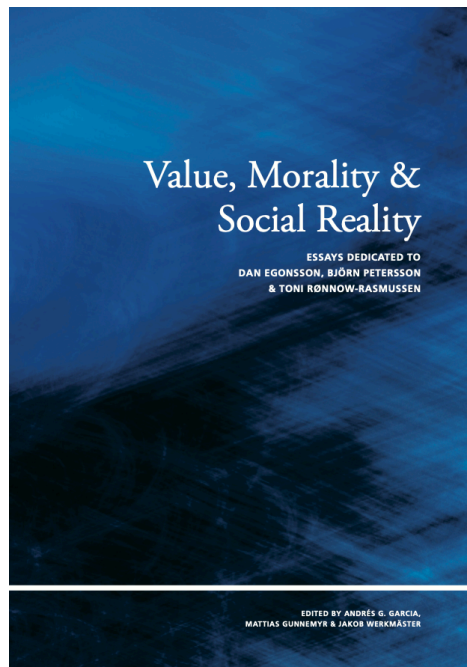
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The Truth about Social Entities

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg

1. Introduction

There is much ado these days about a sub-field of metaphysics called ‘social ontology’. According to its SEP-entry, ‘[social ontology] is concerned with analysing the various entities in the world that arise from social interaction’ (Epstein 2021). Examples of the putative entities under study are social properties such as *being a dollar bill* and *being Prime Minister*, and social objects such as corporations and social groups. In earlier writings I have argued in some detail on a case-by-case basis that, although there certainly are *truths* about such objects and features, there is little reason to suppose that there are such entities ‘out there in the world’, in a substantive ontic sense. In this paper, I will bring together the main ideas and claims of these papers, to provide an overview of the position I defend.¹ If my reasoning is on the right track, there is in fact no domain of social entities for social ontologists to quantify over, using objectual or referential (first and second order) singular quantifiers. Nevertheless, existential claims about such entities can very well be true, provided that they are understood in terms of substitutional quantifiers.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I begin by briefly characterising truthmaker theory (Sect. 2) which my approach to social entities relies on. Following this, I address, first, the ontic status of social properties (Sect. 3), and then the ontic status of social objects (Sect. 4), deploying the truthmaker framework canvassed in Sect. 2. I then develop and clarify my view by introducing and discussing the old (but nowadays little-attended to) distinction between objectual and substitutional

¹ These ideas have materialised while I have been a member of the *Metaphysics and Collectivity* research group, founded by associate professor Björn Petersson and others. I am very grateful to Björn for many fruitful discussions over the years. Björn’s stimulating 2007-paper in *The Journal of Philosophy* was in fact one of my entry points to social ontology, and specifically to the issue of the causal standing of social objects.

quantifiers (Sect. 5). Subsequently (Sect. 6), I address a potential problem for my approach: the fact that social entities are, in some sense, causal. I end with some concluding remarks in Sect. 7.

2. Truthmaker Theory

In my theorising about ‘social reality’, I set off from the idea that contingent truths in general have *truthmakers*: entities (objects, properties, states of affairs, events) in the world that make true sentences/statements/propositions true – i.e., entities in virtue of which the truths are true (for general discussion of truthmaker theory, see e.g. Heil 2003; Armstrong 2004; Cameron 2008; Mellor 2009/2012). Importantly, truthmakers need not exactly mirror or correspond to the content of the truths in question. Truthmakers can very well be, in David Armstrong’s terminology (2004: 33), ‘deflationary’. Such truthmakers typically do not, at first sight, look ‘fully dressed up’ for the occasion, but nevertheless they suffice to make the relevant statement true. Here are some examples from the metaphysical literature that illustrate the notion of deflationary truthmaking:

- Tensed statements made true by B-facts (e.g. Mellor 1998).
- Dispositional statements made true by categorical properties plus laws of nature (e.g. Armstrong 1997).
- Statements about rainbows made true by sunlight-reflecting raindrops (e.g. Mellor 2009/2012).
- Statements about macroscopical objects and properties made true by fundamental particles arranged X-wise (e.g. Heil 2003; Cameron 2008).²

Note that it does not follow from the fact that a statement has deflationary truthmakers that the putative state of affairs expressed by that statement has been ‘reduced’ to the relevant deflationary truthmakers. Reduction is typically understood in terms of identification (see my 2019a for detailed discussion). But deflationary truthmakers cannot, in general, be taken to be *identical* with the putative states of affairs expressed by the relevant statements: for example, states of

² To fill in some more detail: Truthmaker B-theorists will say that a true utterance of the tensed ‘I ran yesterday’ is made true by the B-fact – or ‘tenseless’ state of affairs – that the utterance is located one day after the day on which the utterer (or a temporal counterpart of her) runs. Truthmaker categoricists will say that a true utterance of the dispositional ‘This substance is corrosive’ is made true by the categorical properties of the substance plus the obtaining laws of nature. Deflationists about rainbows (as we may call them) will say that a true utterance of ‘There is a rainbow east of us’ is made true by sun-light reflecting raindrops east of the persons in question. And truthmaker deflationists about macro-scopic objects and properties will say that a true utterance of ‘This brick is rectangular’ is made true by fundamental particles arranged in certain complex ways (‘rectangular-brick-wise’).

affairs *not* containing any A-properties (i.e., properties such as being past, being present and being future), so-called B-facts, cannot be identified with putative states of affairs that contain such properties (so-called A-facts). B-theorists in the philosophy of time instead typically claim that, in an ontic, worldly sense, *there are no* A-facts – although there certainly are *true tensed statements* (which are made true by B-facts).

Although the adoption of a (deflationary) truthmaker theory is quite popular in general metaphysics, surprisingly, very few social ontologists (if any) have invoked such a theory in relation to social ontology. A deflationary truthmaker approach is, I think, particularly suitable in relation to putative social entities – as I will try to explain and illustrate in the following sections.

3. Social Properties

I begin by applying a deflationary truthmaker approach to (putative) social properties. An important sub-category of the social properties, often focused on by social ontologists, is the category of institutional properties (e.g. Searle 1995; 2010). These are properties or ‘statuses’ which depend for their ‘existence’ on our acceptance of constitutive rules (‘institutions’), which have the illocutionary force of *declarations*. The relevant constitutive rules are standardly taken to be of the form ‘X counts as Y in context C’, where the X term picks out an object (or a kind of object) and the Y term expresses a property – such as *being a dollar bill*, *being President*, *having grade G in subject S* – which is simply *assigned* to X, and which consequently is not reducible to any brute, physical properties of X. Below, I first briefly discuss institutional properties, and then I go on to address non-institutional social properties. I propose a deflationary truthmaker account of both kinds of property.

3.1 Institutional properties

Pace Searle (e.g. 2010: 11-12), I do not think we should conceive of the assignment of an institutional property to an object (or to a collection of objects of a certain kind) as involving *creation* of something worldly: a token of an ontic property, which was not instantiated by the relevant object (or objects) prior to the assignment. The notion that something is literally created by such an assignment suggests peculiar action at a distance or even magic: it is hard to see that there could be a naturalistic mechanism at work (Effingham 2010; my 2019b; 2021).³ Such a

³ Admittedly, Searle maintains that such properties are ‘ontologically subjective’ (e.g. Searle 2010: 18). However, it is unclear what this alleged mode of existence amounts to and how claims of ontological subjectivity cohere with statements such as these: ‘[Declarations] change the world by declaring that a state of affairs exists and thus bringing that state of affairs into existence’ (Searle 2010:

mechanism would in any case violate the special theory of relativity, since the mechanism would involve, in standard cases, *instantaneous* generation of the institutional property (in the reference frame of the assigner) (see my 2021 for detailed discussion). Even more troublesome, sometimes we assign institutional properties, as it were, *backwards in time*. For example, at universities, grades and appointments are regularly assigned retroactively. A standard scenario: a student completes an assignment on a certain date t , but a busy professor grades the assignment at a later date t' and in so doing gives the student an official grade which is valid from the *earlier* time t onwards. If something is literally created by such retroactive assignments, they will involve backwards generation.⁴ In fact, in some reference frames (moving at high velocity relative to the reference frame in which the assignment takes place), ordinary *synchronic* assignments will, from their points of view, involve backwards generation, if such assignments involve creation of ontic properties (this is illustrated in detail in my 2021). All of this suggests, I think, that assignments of institutional properties do *not* involve creation of worldly, ontic properties.

Fortunately, a deflationary truthmaker theory enables us to explain what goes on in these cases, without us having to postulate institutional properties as ontic entities. In a nutshell, the account is this: When we accept a constitutive rule or declaration of the form ‘X counts as Y (at time t)’, that acceptance makes it *true* that X is Y (at time t). Thus, the truthmakers for statements about X’s being Y (at time t) are simply these acceptances or states of mind (which may be ‘located’ at times differing from t) – the truthmakers do not involve an institutional property, Y, instantiated by X (at time t). The relevant institutional *predicate* applies to the object in question, but this is not because the object has started to instantiate an ontic property; rather, the predicate applies in virtue of the collective *acceptance* of the constitutive rule or declaration in question. Thus, the application of the institutional predicate is simply an instance of ‘mere Cambridge change’ (cf. Geach 1969: 71-72): a predicate begins to apply to an object at a certain location because of a physical or mental change that happens elsewhere, even at another time (for detailed discussion, see my 2021).⁵

The resulting view of putative institutional properties can thus be regarded as a form of *predicate nominalism* (cf., e.g., Armstrong 1978: 12-14). On this view, an

12); ‘the whole point of having the notion of “fact” [or state of affairs] is to have a notion for that which stands outside the statement but which makes it true, or in virtue of which it is true, if it is true’ (Searle 1995: 211). For extensive critical discussion, see my (2021).

⁴ Some social ontologists apparently happily embrace this consequence; see e.g. Silver (2022).

⁵ Dan Sperber has informed me that he proposed a similar ‘mere-Cambridge-change’ account of institutional properties already in 2011. See his *Seventh European Congress of Analytic Philosophy* (ECAP7) lecture in Milano entitled ‘The Deconstruction of Social Unreality’ (unpublished in written form), available online at: <https://vimeo.com/28924148>. I was completely unaware of this talk when I wrote my (2021), but it is certainly exciting and encouraging that our analyses converge in this way: as Sperber put it (personal communication), this convergence may be taken as ‘indirect evidence that we may well be on the right track’.

object can be said to have a ‘property’ simply in virtue of a suitable predicate applying to the object in question. Another way of putting the idea is to say that institutional properties are merely so-called *abundant properties*, not sparse properties, in the terminology introduced by David Lewis (see his 1986: 59-60; for discussions of the sparse/abundant distinction, see my 2021 and 2022). That is, institutional properties are not immanent universals or tropes, but should be understood merely in terms of true predications.

3.2 Non-institutional Social Properties

What about social properties which are not *assigned* to objects but which, allegedly, somehow *emerge* due to social interactions (see e.g. Bunge 1996; Elder-Vass 2010; Lawson 2013; 2016). Putative examples of such properties include *being able to arrest suspects* (a property held by police officers), *being able to dismiss employees* (a property held by corporations), and *being able to influence the normative beliefs and behaviour of individual persons* (a property held by social groups) (ibid.).⁶ Do such properties exist in an ontic sense? In order to address this issue, we need first to distinguish between (supposedly) non-institutional social properties had by *individuals* (or, possibly, by physical objects) and (purportedly) non-institutional social properties had by *social objects*, such as corporations and social groups. Let me begin by addressing the former properties.

Social properties had by individuals are clearly *extrinsic*, even if they are not institutional: they are ‘properties’ that individuals have because they stand in various ‘relations’ to other individuals (or to ‘social objects’ of which they are ‘part’ or ‘related’ to). A physical duplicate of an individual with such ‘properties’, existing in social isolation on a remote planet, would not have these properties – which is why it makes sense to call them *social* (Lawson 2013; my 2020). Should we, then, think of non-institutional social properties as ontic (or, in Lewis’s terminology, as sparse)? Elder-Vass, Lawson and other critical realists say *yes*, because they hold that such properties are so-called *powers*, i.e. ontic causal properties which have their causal profile essentially. The fatal problem with this proposal is that powers are – in the general metaphysical literature – supposed to be *intrinsic* features of things (see, e.g. Harré 1970; Molnar 2003; Bird 2007). Non-institutional social properties had by individuals can thus only be conceptualised as powers on pain of contradiction (see my 2020 for extensive discussion). Being contradictory, we can

⁶ I think many of the examples referred to in relevant literature are, in fact, institutional. For example, a person typically satisfies ‘is a police officer’ by way of a collectively accepted declaration (such as a signed diploma), and thereby the person also typically satisfies predicates such as ‘has the right to arrest suspects’ (which is a mere deontic-power predicate – it is not, as such, a causal predicate); see my 2020 for detailed discussion. Here, however, I proceed on the assumption that the relevant social properties are not institutional, for the sake of the argument.

conclude that non-institutional social properties *qua* powers (had by individuals) do not exist in an ontic sense.

But suppose believers in non-institutional social properties denied that such properties are powers and merely maintained that they are ontic, extrinsic properties that individuals have because they stand in various ontic relations to other individuals (or social objects). Is such a view tenable? One objection to such a position is that it seems to be in conflict with Ockham's Razor: the extrinsic properties in question seem to be ontologically superfluous.

Consider a purely spatial example: if we postulate two individuals *a* and *b*, and an ontic dyadic relation of *being spatially separated by 10 m* which is jointly instantiated by *a* and *b*, is it not then redundant to also postulate an ontic, extrinsic monadic property, *being separated from a by 10 m*, which is instantiated by *b*, and a corresponding ontic, extrinsic monadic property, *being separated from b by 10 m*, which is instantiated by *a*? If we have the ontic dyadic relation (jointly instantiated by *a* and *b*), it seems we already have all we need to explain why the monadic predicate 'is separated from *a* by 10 m' is true of *b*, and why the monadic predicate 'is separated from *b* by 10 m' is true of *a*. These predicates apply to *b* and *a*, respectively, because of the ontic *dyadic relation* that is jointly instantiated by *a* and *b*. Likewise for the full sentences '*b* is separated from *a* by 10 m' and '*a* is separated from *b* by 10 m': a deflationary truthmaker theorist will maintain that both sentences are made true by the 'deflationary' state of affairs that *a* and *b* are separated by 10 m; there is no reason to postulate two distinct 'inflationary' states of affairs here: *b*'s having the ontic, extrinsic property of being separated from *a* by 10 m (which makes the first sentence true), and *a*'s having the ontic, extrinsic property of being separated from *b* by 10 m (which makes the second sentence true). To postulate such inflationary states of affairs would be to violate Ockham's razor.

I suggest that a deflationary truthmaker theorist should respond similarly with respect to putative non-institutional social properties had by individuals. It is not immediately obvious what exactly the relevant underlying ontic relations are supposed to be in these cases,⁷ but the general strategy for deflationary truthmaker theorists is clear (given that suitable ontic relations can be identified): maintain that it is true to *say* that individual *i* is *F* (where '*F*' is a non-institutional social predicate), but hold that the truthmakers for the relevant truth do not involve any ontic, extrinsic non-institutional social properties but merely the relevant ontic relations that hold among the relevant individuals. (Alternatively – if it is hard to find plausible ontic relations here – maintain that the truths are made true by the mental attitudes of the individuals involved. However, if the latter route is taken,

⁷ The authors in question speak of 'interactions', 'collective practices', 'relational organisation', 'organising structure', etc. Insofar as these notions are supposed to refer to deontic relations (e.g. Lawson 2016: 364-365) – or presuppose the ontic existence of social objects or wholes (of which the individuals in question are parts, components or members) – I would deny that these terms succeed in picking out genuine, ontic relations (see my 2020, and below, Sect. 4).

the deflationary truthmaker theorist is coming very close to adopting the proposal discussed in Sect. 3.1 concerning institutional properties. In the end, this may very well be the most advisable approach; cf. note 6 above; see my 2020 for further discussion.⁸)

Next, consider alleged non-institutional social properties had by *social objects*, such as corporations and social groups. Such properties need not be extrinsic, but can be intrinsic to the objects in question. (Extrinsic social properties had by social objects face the same issues as those just described in relation to individuals.) Such intrinsic social properties can consistently be taken to be powers. However, the notion that there are ontic powers at the level of social objects as wholes faces a causal exclusion problem analogous to the causal exclusion problem discussed in the philosophy of mind (e.g. Kim 2005): given the causal abilities and performances of the individuals who make up the social object (in the case of a social group), or who manage and administer the social object on behalf of the social object (in the case of a corporation), the causal powers of the social object itself, as a whole, seem redundant. The postulation of such ‘holistic’ powers seems to entail systematic causal overdetermination, at least if they are taken to be manifested (see my 2014a, 2014b, 2020 for extensive discussion). Ockham’s Razor rules that we should not postulate such redundant ontic properties.

A more fundamental problem, however, is that, arguably, social objects do not even exist, in an ontic sense – a thesis I will support in the next section. If they do not exist in an ontic sense, they cannot instantiate social properties: for to instantiate such properties, they must exist in an ontic sense.

4. Social Objects

As with social properties, a distinction can be made between *institutional* and *non-institutional* instances. I will begin by addressing institutional objects, and then I will discuss non-institutional social objects. I will propose a deflationary truthmaker account of both kinds of object.

4.1 Institutional Objects

Institutional objects are non-identical with physical/brute objects and are, allegedly, *declared* into being.⁹ Searle exemplifies with corporations and non-cash money.

⁸ To me, it seems quite plausible to maintain that the reason a police officer can arrest someone by uttering ‘You’re under arrest!’ (perhaps while physically grabbing the person in question), is that such an utterance is a *declaration* conforming with the collectively accepted rights and duties of police officers (cf. note 6 and my 2020).

⁹ Elsewhere (Hansson Wahlberg 2014c), I have argued that, strictly speaking, a physical object or person X who comes to satisfy an institutional *sortal* predicate Y can also be said to be an ‘institutional

Additional possible examples include, I take it, universities, borders, States and laws.

Searle writes about the creation of a corporation:

In this case we seem to have created a remarkably potent object, a limited liability corporation, so to speak out of thin air. No pre-existing object was operated on to turn it into a corporation. Rather, we simply made it the case by fiat, by Declaration, that the corporation exists. (Searle 2010: 98)¹⁰

As I argue in my (2021), the idea that an object is literally created in this way is misguided. It is more sensible, I suggest, to adapt the deflationary truthmaker account of institutional properties and apply it to objects. On this account, a declaration to the effect that a corporation exists is made (e.g., a signing of a certain document), and because of this declaration it becomes true to *say*, ‘A corporation, founded in such and such a way, exists’. The truthmaker for such an existential assertion should not be taken to be a new, ontic, institutional object that is somehow brought into existence in the world (perhaps, at its ‘institutional location’, cf. Hindriks 2013: 418) simultaneously with (or perhaps even before) the declaration. That would lead to difficulties of the kind discussed above, in Sect 3.1. Rather, the deflationary truthmakers should be assumed to consist simply of the declaration itself, together with representations of the relevant legal regulation (for discussion, see my 2021).

4.2. Non-institutional Social Objects

Some (putative) objects can be called social simply because they have individuals (two or more) as *members*. Such objects need not be institutional, i.e. they need not be declared into being. Examples of non-institutional social objects, spoken of in the social sciences, are *collectives* of various sorts (e.g., crowds, audiences and mobs), *categories* (e.g., people over fifty, redheads) and, possibly, (at least some instances of) *social groups* (e.g. street bands, football teams and book clubs).¹¹ As characterised in standard social science textbooks on the topic (e.g. Forsyth 2019), collectives and categories are (roughly) mere collections of individuals who happen

object’. Hence, such an object/person X is *both* a physical object and an institutional object. Here, however, I reserve the term ‘institutional object’ for the so-called free-standing-Y-term cases (see e.g. Searle 2010: 98).

¹⁰ Searle quotes the California Code in support of his view; similar formulations can be found in Swedish law.

¹¹ Some social groups do seem to be introduced via declarations. Faculty committees are arguably cases in point (cf. Epstein 2019; my ms.). Thus, perhaps we should allow that at least some social groups are institutional(-ish) objects. In any case, a deflationary truthmaker account can handle them – either along the way characterized above (4.1), regarding corporations, or along the way described below, in this section.

to be located at the same place (collectives) or who happen to share some characteristic (categories). I have not, in earlier work, written specifically about collectives and categories, but I conjecture that it would be quite straightforward to offer a deflationary truthmaker theory of such entities (or rather, of *truths* about them) simply in terms of pluralities of individuals who happen to have appropriate locations/properties.¹²

Social groups, by contrast, do seem, at least *prima facie*, to be less easy to account for in terms of deflationary truthmakers. As has been repeatedly pointed out by social ontologists, social groups are conceptualised as *non-extensional* entities, both in colloquial speech and in the social-scientific literature: we maintain – truly, we would like to think – that distinct social groups can have the same members. For example, a chess club and an orchestra can consist of the same members. Because of the non-extensional character of social groups, many philosophers (e.g. Uzquiano 2004; Ritchie 2013; Epstein 2015, 2019) think that statements about social groups are made true by *sui generis* entities which are irreducible to sets/sums/pluralities of individuals, but which are *constituted* or *grounded* by such entities (where constitution/grounding relations are taken to be asymmetric dependence relations distinct from *n*-adic identity relations). Such philosophers thus tend to accept a bifurcated, levelled ontology in the social realm: over and above the relevant individuals (the members of the social groups in question) there are (co-membered) ontic social groups (see the diagrams in, e.g., Sawyer 2005: 70; Elder-Vass 2010: 50; Forsyth 2019: 36). I will now argue, drawing on my (ms.), that the non-extensionality of social groups can in fact be accounted for on a deflationary truthmaker account. Thus, this feature does not force us to postulate inflationary – i.e., constituted or grounded – ontic social groups as truthmakers for truths about them.¹³

To start with, on a deflationary truthmaker account it can be true to *say* that a certain social group (a street band, a book club) has been formed/created, at a certain time *t*, simply because some individuals have started to behave in a certain way (playing music in a coordinated way on a street) or entered certain states of mind (started to think of each other as members of a common book club) at *t*. The statement in question need not be made true by an ontic social group which popped into being in the external world at *t*. Now, if it is true to say of a further ‘social group’ that ‘it’ was created at time *t'* ($t \neq t'$), then the first group and the second

¹² To allow for membership change – if collectives and categories are conceptualised as being able to change members, which is a bit unclear – the truthmakers may more specifically be taken to involve *distinct* individuals (or temporal parts or stages of distinct individuals) at distinct times. The relevant, distinct pluralities may in effect be said to be successive ‘temporal parts’ or ‘stages’ of the ‘collective’ / ‘category’ in question. See my (2014c) and (2019a) for discussion of temporal parts and stages of institutional objects when the latter are understood as ontic entities.

¹³ In my (ms.), I handle additional allegedly problematic features of social groups in terms of deflationary truthmakers.

group cannot consistently be held to be identical even if they ‘consist’ of the same members (i.e., even if the truthmakers for the claims in question involve the same individuals). The ‘groups’ will have distinct ‘properties’ – i.e., there will be distinct truths about them, e.g., about when they were ‘created’ – and hence they cannot be identified, on pain of violating Leibniz’s Law. Moreover, social groups that were created simultaneously, can still – indeed, must – be distinguished if it is true to say that ‘they’ are governed by distinct rules or norms. The relevant deflationary truthmakers here may simply be external documents, or people’s attitudes or dispositions (for further discussion, see my ms.). Thus, the fact that social groups are conceptualised, and truly described, as non-extensional does not force us to recognise them as worldly, ontic entities, over and above individuals acting under distinct rules or norms.

5. ‘Existence’ in Ontic and Non-ontic Senses: Objectual and Substitutional Quantification

When I say that social objects such as corporations and social groups do not exist in an ontic sense, what exactly do I mean by that? What I mean is that the existential, singular quantifier, \exists , when understood in the standard *objectual* or *referential* sense (e.g. Quine 1948/1953), does not succeed in ranging over any such objects.¹⁴ Thus, if a true ordinary language statement, such as ‘A book club has now been formed’, made at time t_1 , is regimented as ‘ $(\exists x) (Fx \wedge Lxt_1 \wedge \neg Lxt_0)$ ’ (where $F = _$ is a book club with such and such features, and $L = _$ is located at time $_$, and t_0 is an arbitrary time before t_1), and the existential quantifier is read as an objectual quantifier, then, on my view, the regimented version expresses a *falsehood*. However, if a *substitutional* interpretation of the existential quantifier is adopted (e.g. Marcus 1972/1993; Kripke 1976; Haack 1978, Ch. 4; in which case the symbol ‘ Σ ’ is often used), the formalised version *does* express a truth – assuming that there is a *true substitution instance* of the form ‘ $Fa \wedge Lat_1 \wedge \neg Lat_0$ ’, as the existential quantifier, on this reading, says that there is.¹⁵ The *truthmakers* for such a substitution instance are, I suggest, simply of the kind described above (4.2) – they are individuals

¹⁴ The *plural* existential quantifier, in sentences such as ‘ $\exists xx (Sxx, a)$ ’, may indeed succeed in ranging over pluralities of individuals, even if it is read referentially (e.g., when formalising ordinary language sentences such as ‘Some individuals surround object a ’). However, such ‘social objects’ are *plural*, not singular, entities. Some people may hold it is a misuse of the term to speak of mere pluralities (i.e., several entities) as ‘objects’ or ‘entities’. For relevant discussion, see Oliver and Smiley (2016), especially (Ch. 15).

¹⁵ The formal language in question is assumed to have a suitable stock of names – but this assumption can be relaxed by merely requiring that we *could* have introduced a suitable name which would have allowed us to state or form a true substitutions instance of the kind just described.

thinking of each other as members of a book club (see my ms. for further discussion).

Similarly, when I say that there are no social properties in an ontic (or sparse) sense, I mean the following: if ‘ \exists ’ is understood as a *referential* second-order quantifier it will not succeed in ranging over any social properties; formal sentences beginning ‘ $(\exists F) \dots$ ’ (where ‘ F ’ is supposed to be a predicate variable ranging over social properties) will consequently be *false*. But since there can be *true substitution instances* for sentences beginning ‘ $(\exists F) \dots$ ’, that involve social *predicates*, ‘ \exists ’ can figure as a *substitutional* second-order quantifier in true second-order existential social sentences (e.g., of the form ‘ $(\exists F) Fa$ ’, saying, in effect, that there is a social *truth* concerning a – which is the case if, e.g., ‘ a is president’ is true, which it is if people accept the relevant constitutive rules, as outlined above, in Sect. 3.1).

Thus, I suggest that when we, in ordinary language, say that there are social objects such as corporations and social groups, and social properties such as the property (or ‘status’) of being money and the property (or ‘status’) of being married, we should be taken to be implicitly using substitutional quantifiers.

I should perhaps highlight that my invocation of substitutional quantifiers sets me apart from standard truthmaker theorists. To my knowledge, truthmaker theorists do not make use of the distinction between objectual and substitutional quantifiers. I think, however, that this distinction helps to clarify how there can be existential truths about entities that do not ‘really’ exist (as, e.g., Cameron 2008 puts it).

6. The Causal Impact of Social Entities

As canvassed above, my view is that there are no social entities (objects and properties) in an ontic sense, although there are truths concerning such entities. This position seems to face an immediate problem though: in colloquial speech and in the social sciences, we speak of social entities as causes and effects; but to be causes and effects, social entities must, apparently, be real. How else could they be related by causal relations?

My answer: yes indeed, there are causal *truths* involving institutional entities as relata, but such truths need not be made true by ontic social entities standing in ontic causal relations. Compare: there are causal truths involving *absences* as putative relata, and such truths are evidently not made true (partly) by absences standing in ontic causal relations. Absences are *nothings* and simply cannot serve as ontic relata. Nevertheless, it can be true to *say* ‘the gardener’s failure to water the flowers caused them to wither’. For example, if such a statement is analysed, in line with Lewis (2004), in terms of a pair of true statements (‘the gardener fails to water the flowers at t_1 ’, and ‘the flowers wither at t_2 ’), which are such that had the first statement been false, the second statement would have been false, we can see how the original causal statement can be *true* even though there are no absences in an ontic sense.

(Other accounts can be adopted here, such as Mellor's (1995) or Woodward's (2003).)

Likewise, I suggest, for causal truths about social entities. If we analyse 'Joe's bad grades caused him to be unemployed' in terms of the two statements 'Joe has bad grades at t_1 ' and 'Joe is unemployed at t_2 ', which are such that they are both true, but had the first statement been false, the second statement would have been false, we can begin to see how the initial, explicitly causal sentence may be true although there are no social properties in an ontic sense. (Again, various accounts of causal statements may be adopted here.) In a slogan, my view is that true causal statements about social entities express 'mere abundant causation' (for detailed discussion of this notion, see my 2022). That is, such statements are not made true by ontic causal relations (generative processes, to be more precise, which would be instances of 'sparse causation') which connect the putative 'relata' in question. Nevertheless, they are true. The development of a detailed account of the relevant deflationary truthmakers for such truths (an account which avoids committing to non-actual possible worlds) is currently work-in-progress. The general idea, however, is that the truthmakers consist, at least partly, in people's *representations* of social entities, and the way these representations (or their physical substrates/realisers) affect people's decision making (for some preliminary discussions, see my 2014a; 2014b; 2020; 2021; 2022).

Lastly, some words about the Eleatic Principle (EP) – roughly, that to be is to be causal. EP is endorsed by many metaphysicians and social ontologists. However, I think it needs to be restricted or specified in order to be acceptable. As we saw above, absences can truly be said to be causal, and arguably, likewise for social entities. But absences and social entities do not exist in an ontic sense (this should be completely uncontroversial for absences). Thus, I suggest that EP should be understood as saying: to be in an ontic sense is to be sparsely causal. In this version of EP, my view of social 'entities' as not being ontic but as partaking in mere abundant causation is fully compatible with the principle (see my 2022 and ms. for further discussion).¹⁶

7. Conclusion

I have argued that there are no social entities in an ontic sense.¹⁷ If I am correct about this, there is in fact no social *ontology* in the sense of a domain of (singular) social objects such as corporations and social groups, and social properties or

¹⁶ Perhaps EP has to be rejected in any case: this may be so if we have to accept Platonic entities, such as numbers, in our ontology (cf. Colyvan 1998).

¹⁷ With the exception of pluralities of individuals – if pluralities of individuals are properly referred to as 'social objects' or 'social entities', albeit plural ones. See note 14 above.

‘statuses’ such as being money and being a professor. In this purely extensional sense of ‘social ontology’, there has, in my view, been ‘much ado about nothing’ over the last few decades. Of course, this is not to suggest that the *subject* or *discipline* social ontology (understood as a sub-field of metaphysics) is otiose – for example, we still have to figure out what exactly the relevant truthmakers are for the various social truths in question, and these are issues which no doubt are very complex, difficult and important. Thus, I end by citing Donald Davidson, who reportedly said in relation to another philosophical topic: ‘It’s good to know we shan’t run out of work’.¹⁸

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¹⁸ See Haack (1978: 121). I have been unable, however, to track down the formulation in Davidson’s own work.

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