

Social Construction and Meta-Ground

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Abstract: The notion of social construction plays an integral role in many areas of social philosophy, including the philosophy of gender and sex, the philosophy of race, and the philosophy of disability. Yet it is far from clear how this notion is to be understood. One promising proposal, which can be traced back to the work of Brian Epstein (2015, 2016) and which has recently been championed by Jonathan Schaffer (2017) and Aaron Griffith (2018a, 2018b), is that social construction may be analyzed in terms of the notion of metaphysical grounding. In this paper, I introduce a new problem for such a ground-theoretic approach to social construction, and I argue that extant ground-theoretic accounts are unable to avoid this and other problems. I then propose a novel ground-theoretic account of social construction which avoids these problems. The core idea is that cases of social construction involve a distinctively social means of construction. I develop this idea using the notion of meta-ground, so that on the resulting view the distinctive feature of socially constructed facts is that their associated meta-grounds include a suitable connective social fact.

The notion of social construction plays an integral role in many areas of social philosophy, including the philosophy of gender and sex, the philosophy of race, and the philosophy of disability. Thus, feminist theorists have long maintained that gender is not a biological phenomenon but a social construct.¹ Race theorists continue to debate the question of whether race is biologically real or socially constructed.² And some theorists of disability contend that disability is socially constructed.³ In order to understand these various positions and make progress on these debates, we need to understand what it is for something to be socially constructed. Yet it is far from clear how this notion (or cluster of notions) is to be understood.

One promising proposal, which can be traced back to the pioneering work of Brian Epstein (2015, 2016) and which has recently been championed by Jonathan Schaffer (2017) and Aaron Griffith (2018a, 2018b), is that social construction may be analyzed in terms of the notion of metaphysical grounding. However, a simple ground-theoretic analysis of social construction faces a well-known problem,⁴ and it is unclear whether and how the analysis may be modified to avoid the problem. In this paper, I introduce a new problem for ground-theoretic approaches to social construction, and I argue against several strategies for resolving both problems. I then propose a novel ground-theoretic account of social construction which avoids these problems. The intuitive idea is that cases of social construction involve a distinctively social *means of construction*. I develop this idea using the notion of a meta-ground, which is a ground of a grounding fact. According to the resulting proposal, what it is for a fact φ to be socially

¹ See, e.g., de Beauvoir (1949), Haslanger (2000), Ásta (2018: ch. 4), and Dembroff (2021).

² See, e.g., Mills (1998), Kitcher (1999), Haslanger (2012), and Spencer (2015).

³ See, e.g., Barnes (2016) and Ásta (2018: ch. 5).

⁴ See Schaffer (2017: 2454–5), Passinsky (2020: 511), and Pagano (2021: 1656).

constructed is for it to have some ground Γ , such that the fact that Γ grounds φ is itself at least partially grounded in some suitable connective social fact.

The paper is in three parts. In the first part, I clarify the target notion of social construction and formulate the desiderata for an adequate account (§1). I then present a simple ground-theoretic analysis of social construction (§2), and I argue that it faces two problem cases (§3). In the second part (§4), I expound and argue against extant strategies for dealing with these problem cases, including those found in Schaffer (2017, 2019) and Griffith (2018b). In the third part, I develop and defend my meta-ground solution to the problem cases. I first present the meta-ground view and argue that it avoids both problems (§5). I then address two important potential objections to my account (§6).

1. Social construction

Let me begin by clarifying the target notion of social construction. It is now commonplace to distinguish ‘constitutive’ from ‘causal’ social construction.⁵ In the causal case, social factors play a role in causing some phenomenon. For example, Beijing’s being polluted is causally socially constructed insofar as it is at least partly caused by social practices such as the burning of fossil fuels, the activities of heavy industry, and the driving of motor vehicles. In contrast, in the constitutive case, social factors play a role in ‘constituting’ some phenomenon. For example, Obama’s being a US citizen is constitutively socially constructed insofar as it is at least partly constituted by certain social arrangements, such as Obama’s meeting the eligibility requirements for US citizenship which are laid down in the relevant laws. It is this notion of

⁵ The distinction is due to Haslanger (1995, 2003).

constitutive social construction which is my focus in this paper, and I will henceforth refer to it simply as ‘social construction’. While we have a rough-and-ready grasp of what it means for facts about citizenship to be ‘constituted’ by social arrangements, it is far from clear how this idea is to be spelled out. In contemporary metaphysics, constitution is standardly taken to be the relation that obtains between an ordinary material thing (e.g., a statue) and the matter that makes it up (e.g., a lump of clay). But facts about citizenship are not ordinary material things, and social arrangements are not matter in the usual sense. So, Obama’s being a US citizen is not ‘constituted’ by social arrangements in this sense of material constitution (cf. Schaffer 2017: 2452). We are therefore left with the question of how, exactly, to understand the relevant notion of social construction.

Before we can answer this question, it is important to first clarify the desiderata for an adequate account. I would like to suggest that an adequate account of this notion must meet four desiderata. The first two are of a general theoretical nature: First, the account should integrate social construction into a general metaphysics by showing how the socially constructed fits in with other parts of reality (Schaffer 2017: §1.2; cf. Griffith 2018b: §2). Second and relatedly, it should account for the platitude that the socially constructed is non-fundamental and generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social factors (Schaffer 2017: 2452).

The next desideratum is of a more pragmatic character: an adequate account of social construction should supply us with a notion that is apt and useful for legitimate social constructionist projects. Of course, there are many such projects, and it may very well turn out that no single notion of social construction is conducive to all of them. So, it would be too demanding to require that an account of social construction yield a notion that is apt for all of these projects. A more reasonable demand is that the account should yield a notion that is apt for

at least some of the most influential and consequential social constructionist projects. Here I focus on two such projects in particular.

The first is what Sally Haslanger (2003) has called the ‘debunking project’. This is the project of debunking our ordinary conception of a given phenomenon as ‘natural’—in the sense of being physical, chemical, or biological—by showing that the phenomenon is socially constructed.⁶ Thus, for example, when social constructionists about race argue that race is a social construct and therefore not biologically real, they are plausibly taken to be engaged in this sort of project. For the purposes of this debunking project, it is important that the notion of social construction license the inference from something’s being socially constructed to its being neither physical, nor chemical, nor biological.⁷ Otherwise, the debunker could not straightforwardly argue that a given phenomenon is not ‘natural’ in the relevant sense because it is socially constructed.⁸

⁶ See Pagano’s manuscript “Being Social, Being Socially Constructed, and Being Fundamental Relative to Social Reality” for a similar gloss on the ‘natural’. There are many alternative senses of ‘natural’ in the philosophical literature, including *doing important causal/explanatory work*, *not being gerrymandered or arbitrary*, and *being joint-carving*. The debunker is not claiming that the phenomenon in question is not ‘natural’ in any of these other senses. This is important to note because it has been argued in the literature that socially constructed kinds can do important causal/explanatory work (Khalidi 2015: §3; Mason 2016: 843; Barnes 2017: 2432–3), are not gerrymandered or arbitrary (Mason 2016: 842; cf. Barnes 2017: §5 for an opposing view), and are joint-carving in either the Siderean sense (Sider 2017: §5) or some other sense (Barnes 2017: §5). The debunker can accept that socially constructed phenomena are ‘natural’ in these other senses while maintaining that they are neither physical, nor chemical, nor biological.

⁷ Note that a phenomenon which is not itself physical, chemical, or biological can still have a physical, chemical, or biological basis. To illustrate, consider Ásta’s view of sex (2018: §4.1). According to Ásta, the property *being female* is a social status which consists in certain constraints on and enablements to an individual’s behavior. As Ásta herself emphasizes, this property “is not a biological property” (2018: 70) but it has a biological basis insofar as it is conferred onto individuals by legal authorities who are attempting to track certain biological properties, namely sex-stereotypical characteristics.

⁸ Cf. Díaz-León (2013: 1137–8), who contends that social constructionism about *X* is meant to contrast with biological realism about *X*, and that a notion of social construction which serves the purposes of the anti-inevitability project should preserve this contrast. Cf. also Haslanger (2003)

The second project, which was brought to the fore by Ian Hacking (1999: ch. 1), may be called the ‘anti-inevitability project’. Following Esa Díaz-León (2013), I take this project to involve arguing against the inevitability of some phenomenon to make way for social change, by showing that the phenomenon is socially constructed.⁹ Thus, for example, social constructionists about gender who argue that gender is socially constructed and therefore not inevitable—and hence amenable to being abolished or radically transformed through social action—are engaged in this sort of project. For the purposes of this anti-inevitability project, it is important that the notion of social construction license the inference from something’s being socially constructed to its being not inevitable. Otherwise, the constructionist could not straightforwardly argue that a given phenomenon is not inevitable because it is socially constructed.

Let me emphasize that the relevant notion of inevitability here is not that of metaphysical necessity. As Díaz-León notes, showing that a given phenomenon is not metaphysically necessary is not enough to make way for social change, since there are metaphysically contingent phenomena which cannot be changed through social action (2013: 1138). For instance, the laws of nature are metaphysically contingent, but we cannot change them by changing our social practices or arrangements. While it is difficult to precisely characterize the relevant notion of inevitability, the following rough gloss will suffice for our purposes: *x* is not inevitable just in case *x* counterfactually depends upon our social practices or arrangements in a direct way. The caveat of ‘direct’ dependence is meant to exclude cases in which a change in our

and Barnes (2017). Haslanger contrasts constitutively socially constructed kinds with ‘natural’ kinds, which she construes as kinds whose membership conditions involve only or primarily biological or physical features (2003: 316–8). And Barnes attributes to Haslanger the view that social constructs such as gender and race “aren’t natural” but are real (2017: 2424).

⁹ Note that Díaz-León (2013) conceives of the project as pertaining specifically to human traits, whereas I conceive of it as pertaining to phenomena more broadly.

social practices or arrangements leads to a change in some natural features of the world, and this in turn leads to a change in x . For example, if a change in the social practices and institutions surrounding medical research led to technological and medical advances which made it possible for persons without mammary glands to lactate, and this in turn made it possible for mothers and fathers to equitably share in the task of breastfeeding their babies, then the current inequities in breastfeeding responsibilities (in heterosexual couples who choose to breastfeed) would still count as inevitable in the relevant sense. This is as it should be, since social constructionists about gender typically take it for granted that there are significant biological and anatomical differences between human bodies which result in inequities that are inevitable in the relevant sense and ought to be taken into account in a just society.¹⁰

Given the aforementioned inferential connections between a theoretically apt notion of social construction and the notions of the natural and inevitable, it is important to distinguish the socially constructed from the social.¹¹ For arguably, the social can also be natural in the relevant sense (cf. Payton 2023: 742, n. 2, 2024: 439–40). Consider, for example, cooperative activities such as playing together, hunting together, or building a shelter together. These are paradigmatic social phenomena.¹² At the same time, these activities occur in nature among non-human animals. For instance, chimpanzees play together, hyenas hunt together, and beavers build dams together. And these behaviors are studied by ethologists and regarded by them as biological

¹⁰ See, e.g., Haslanger (2000: 49).

¹¹ See Payton (2023: 741–2), Pagano (2024: 85), and Pagano’s manuscripts “The Social and the Socially Constructed” and “Being Social, Being Socially Constructed, and Being Fundamental Relative to Social Reality” for other considerations in favor of distinguishing the social from the socially constructed. Cf. also Schaffer (2019: 753–4), who distinguishes aspects of social reality which involve a rules-moves structure from those that do not and suggests that socially constructed phenomena such as gender and race are of the former kind.

¹² Some theorists even define sociality in terms of cooperation. For example, John Searle defines a social fact as any fact involving collective intentionality (1995: 23–6).

phenomena.¹³ Furthermore, the social can be inevitable in the relevant sense. Just consider the fact that chimpanzees are a cooperative species. This fact is social insofar as it involves cooperation and inevitable insofar as the nature of chimpanzees as a species does not directly counterfactually depend upon our social practices or arrangements. Thus, the notion of the social does not license the inference from something's being social to its being not natural and not inevitable. Since an apt notion of social construction should license the corresponding inference, it should be distinguished from that of the social.

The fourth and final desideratum is extensional adequacy (cf. Pagano 2021). The idea here is that there are some clear cases of entities which are socially constructed and entities which are not. An adequate account of social construction should classify these cases correctly. Otherwise, the account would stray too far from the notion of social construction as we ordinarily understand it. Care must be taken, however, in how 'clear' cases are characterized. For the notion of social construction is in part a stipulative, theoretical notion. Moreover, social constructionist claims are oftentimes meant to be surprising. So, 'clear' cases should not be taken to include all cases in which there is a pre-theoretic intuition one way or the other. Instead, they may be taken to include all those cases in which there is a widely shared, strong and clear intuition or considered judgment. For example, I take it that most of us would confidently judge that the existence of currencies is socially constructed, whereas the existence of atoms is not. The

¹³ There may be some linguistic contexts in which the term 'social' is used in a way that is meant to contrast with the biological. Thus, for example, when some feminists claim that gender is social, they mean that it is not at all biological (Payton 2023: 742, n. 2). But I would argue that this is a semi-technical use of the term 'social' which diverges from both ordinary usage and standard scientific usage. Moreover, I think that it is theoretically useful to distinguish the social from the socially constructed, and to reserve the term 'socially constructed' for those phenomena which are meant to contrast with the biological. So, I think that these feminists ought to cast their claim in terms of the notion of social construction rather than the social.

former then counts as a clear case of social construction, and the latter as a clear case of something which is not socially constructed. Extensional adequacy then demands that an adequate account of social construction count the existence of currencies but not atoms as socially constructed.

To sum up, then, I have proposed that an adequate account of social construction should meet the following four desiderata:

Integration: Integrate social construction into a general metaphysics by showing how the socially constructed fits in with other parts of reality.

Platitude: Account for the platitude that the socially constructed is non-fundamental and generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social factors.

Utility: Supply a notion that is apt and useful for the social constructionist debunking and anti-inevitability projects.

Extensional Adequacy: Account for widely shared, strong and clear intuitions or considered judgments about cases.

With these desiderata in hand, let us now move on to consider the ground-theoretic approach to social construction.

2. Social construction as grounding

The basic idea behind a grounding approach to social construction is that the notion of social construction may be analyzed in terms of the notion of metaphysical grounding (Schaffer 2017; Griffith 2018a, 2018b; cf. Epstein 2015, 2016).

Metaphysical grounding is a distinctively metaphysical, non-causal determination relation (Fine 2001; Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010). A nice illustrative example is provided by the Euthyphro dilemma. Euthyphro and Socrates agree that all and only pious acts are loved by the gods. However, Euthyphro maintains that pious acts are pious *because* they are loved by the gods or *in virtue of* the fact that they are loved by the gods. Socrates demurs. This ‘because’ or ‘in virtue of’ relation is metaphysical grounding. On the Euthyphronic view, the piety of an act is grounded in that act’s being loved by the gods, whereas on the Socratic view that is not the case. Other standard examples of metaphysical grounding include the following: (i) the truth of a conjunction is grounded in the truth of its conjuncts; (ii) the existence of a set is grounded in the existence of its members; (iii) the mental facts are grounded in the physical facts according to the physicalist; and (iv) the social facts are grounded in the individualistic facts according to the ontological individualist.¹⁴ As demonstrated by these examples, metaphysical grounding is intimately tied to explanation: that which is grounded is metaphysically explained by, or explicable on the basis of, its grounds.¹⁵

¹⁴ Of course, one may accept the notion of metaphysical grounding while disagreeing with any of these specific examples.

¹⁵ I intend to remain neutral between a unionist conception of grounding according to which grounding is a form of explanation, and a separatist conception according to which grounding is a form of determination which backs explanation. See Raven (2015: §5) for the distinction between unionism and separatism.

A few more preliminary remarks about grounding are in order. I shall take grounding claims to have the form ‘ Γ grounds φ ’, where Γ is a collection of facts and φ is a single fact.¹⁶ I will refer to Γ as the *grounds* and to φ as the *grounded*. There are two distinctions among grounds which will be important for our purposes. The first is the distinction between full and partial grounds: Γ *fully* grounds φ just in case Γ fully metaphysically determines φ , whereas Γ *partially* grounds φ just in case Γ only partially metaphysically determines φ . Thus, for example, the ontological individualist thinks that the individualistic facts fully ground the social facts. In contrast, an anti-individualist might claim that the individualistic facts only partially ground the social facts. The second distinction is between immediate and mediate grounds: Γ *immediately* grounds φ just in case Γ grounds φ directly or not by way of some ‘intermediary’ facts, whereas Γ *mediately* grounds φ just in case Γ grounds φ indirectly or by way of some ‘intermediary’ facts. Thus, for example, the physical facts might immediately ground the chemical facts but only mediate ground the biological facts by way of the chemical facts. In what follows, I use the term ‘ground’ to denote full, immediate ground, unless otherwise noted.

Here, then, is a simple and straightforward ground-theoretic analysis of social construction:

(SC) What it is for a fact φ to be socially constructed is for it to be at least partially grounded in some social facts Γ .

¹⁶ This is in accord with the ‘fact grounding approach’ of Rosen (2010) and Audi (2012). For alternative approaches, see Fine (2001) and Schaffer (2009). Note that the arguments of this paper do not turn on adopting the fact grounding approach. Those who favor alternative approaches may simply recast the arguments in their preferred terms.

Since SC appeals to the notion of a social fact, it is important to clarify what a social fact is. I take a social fact to be a metaphysically contingent fact about the social world. Of course, this is a circular account since it makes reference to the social.¹⁷ But it will suffice for our purposes, as it is clear enough which facts are contingent ones about the social world and which are not. For example, the fact that two people are going for a walk together, that Biden is president of the United States, and that the piece of paper in my wallet constitutes a dollar bill are contingent facts about the social world. In contrast, the fact that there is life on Earth, that Biden is a featherless biped, and that my wallet is composed of atoms are not contingent facts about the social world.

Although SC does not have any adherents in the literature, it will be instructive to start with this simple analysis and consider how it fares with respect to our desiderata. We will then be in a better position to evaluate the extant proposals in the literature, which may be viewed as modifications of SC which attempt to circumvent certain difficulties.

When it comes to the desiderata of *Integration* and *Platitude*, SC fares very well. It integrates social construction into a general metaphysics by positing that the socially constructed relates to other parts of reality via the general relation of metaphysical grounding (Schaffer 2017: 2456; cf. Griffith 2018b: 396). And it accounts for the platitude that the socially constructed is non-fundamental and generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social factors because the grounded is non-fundamental and generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of its grounds, and the grounds of socially constructed facts are taken to include social

¹⁷ Social ontologists are generally skeptical about the prospects of giving noncircular, necessary and sufficient conditions for being social (cf. Payton 2023: 742). But see Payton (2023) for a sufficient condition for being social.

factors (Schaffer 2017: 2456). However, SC faces difficulties when it comes to the desiderata of *Utility* and *Extensional Adequacy*. Or so I will now argue.

3. Problem cases

To bring out the difficulties faced by SC, I will present two problem cases. The first case, which is familiar from the literature, is that of singleton Supreme Court (Schaffer 2017: 2454–5; Passinsky 2020: 511; Pagano 2021: 1656). Singleton Supreme Court is the singleton set whose sole member is the US Supreme Court. In the grounding literature, it is widely held that the existence of a set is grounded in the existence of its members. Thus, the existence of singleton Supreme Court is grounded in the existence of the Supreme Court. But the fact that the Supreme Court exists is a social fact. So, according to SC, the existence of singleton Supreme Court is socially constructed. This, however, is very counterintuitive. Sets are mathematical objects and mathematical objects are intuitively not the sorts of things that are socially constructed.¹⁸ Thus, SC does not meet the desideratum of *Extensional Adequacy*.¹⁹

The second case, which I introduce here as a new problem for ground-theoretic approaches to social construction, is that of bee colonies. It is a fact that honeybees live in

¹⁸ It may be objected that intuitionists in the philosophy of mathematics think that sets are constructed out of people's mental ideas or representations, and so their considered judgment would be that sets are socially constructed. But being constructed out of people's mental ideas or representations is insufficient for being socially constructed. Thus, Berkeley's view that ordinary material things are constructed out of our mental ideas is standardly regarded as idealist and not social constructionist. Thanks to [reference omitted] for raising this objection.

¹⁹ For readers who are unpersuaded by this case, I offer another logical case (cf. Pagano 2021: 1656–7). Consider the fact that something exists. This fact is grounded in the fact that the Supreme Court exists. So, according to SC, the fact that something exists is socially constructed. But this is counterintuitive. It is worth noting that the aforementioned intuitionist objection to the set case does not pertain to this case because this case does not involve mathematical entities.

colonies. Plausibly, this fact is grounded in the fact that honeybees live close together in a cooperative arrangement that involves the performance of distinct social roles, viz. the roles of queen, drone, and worker. But this is a social fact, since it involves social phenomena such as cooperation and the performance of social roles. So, according to SC, the fact that honeybees live in colonies is socially constructed. Now, this is not manifestly counterintuitive; and so, we do not get an immediate failure of *Extensional Adequacy*, like we did in the set case. However, I submit that we do get a failure of *Extensional Adequacy* on the assumption that *Utility* is satisfied. For if *Utility* is satisfied, then the socially constructed is not natural and not inevitable. But the fact that honeybees live in colonies is a biological fact. Moreover, it is inevitable in the relevant sense: honeybees are instinctually hardwired to live in colonies, and so their living in this way does not directly counterfactually depend upon our social practices or arrangements.²⁰ It follows that the fact that honeybees live in colonies is not socially constructed. Since SC conflicts with this considered judgment, it does not satisfy *Extensional Adequacy*.

As a rejoinder, it may be argued that honeybees do not really cooperate or perform social roles. To be sure, we talk about bees in these terms. But this talk should not be construed literally because genuine cooperation and performance of social roles requires a level of cognitive sophistication which bees lack.²¹ This view, however, is challenged by our best science.

Biologists standardly describe honeybees using the language of cooperation and social roles or

²⁰ If a change in our social practices or arrangements could change the hardwiring of honeybees (or could lead to their extinction), then the fact that honeybees live in colonies might counterfactually depend upon our social practices or arrangements. However, this dependence would only be *indirect* because the change in the bees' way of life would go via a change in some biological aspects of the world. Thus, the bees' way of life would still count as inevitable in the relevant sense.

²¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

tasks.²² And they tend to construe cooperation such that at least some forms of cooperative behavior do not require particularly sophisticated cognitive resources.²³

In any case, there is evidence that some nonhuman animals—including chimpanzees, dolphins, elephants, and wolves—engage in forms of cooperative behavior which require sophisticated cognition, such as intentionally coordinating actions with others to achieve a shared goal (Loukola et al. 2024: 2). So, those who remain unpersuaded by the bee colony case may instead consider communities of chimpanzees, pods of dolphins, herds of elephants, or packs of wolves. Thus, for example, the fact that wolves live in packs is plausibly grounded in the fact that wolves live, feed, and travel together in a cooperative arrangement that involves distinct social statuses and roles. This latter fact involves ‘cooperation’ in the sense of cognitively sophisticated actively coordinated collaboration. It is therefore a social fact, even by our opponent’s lights. Yet the fact that wolves live in packs is not socially constructed because it is biological and inevitable in the relevant sense.

What both of our problem cases demonstrate is that a fact can be partially or even fully grounded in social facts without being socially constructed. The upshot is that being partially or even fully grounded in social facts is *not sufficient* for being socially constructed. The challenge,

²² Consider, for example, the following quotations from academic journals in the biological sciences: “Cooperative activities in honey bee colonies involve the coordinated interactions of multiple workers that perform different, but interrelated tasks” (Schneider and Lewis 2004: 117); “Conflict is rare among the members of a highly cooperative society such as a honey bee colony” (Gilley 2001: 601); and “Honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) are well-known for their sophisticated division of labor with each bee performing sequentially a series of social tasks” (Degirmenci, Thamm, and Scheiner 2018: 65).

²³ See, e.g., Duguid and Melis (2020: §2). Duguid and Melis categorize collaborative behavior into four levels—by-product collaboration, socially influenced collaboration, actively coordinated collaboration, and collaboration based on shared intentionality—and they regard all but the first as genuine cooperation. Recent experimental data suggests that bumblebees engage in socially influenced collaboration and potentially actively coordinated collaboration (Loukola et al. 2024).

then, for a grounding approach to social construction is to distinguish cases of social construction from cases of mere grounding in the social. I now turn to consider the extant responses to this challenge.

4. Extant solutions

The most popular strategy in the literature is to add additional constraints on the *grounds* of socially constructed facts. Thus, Schaffer proposes that to be socially constructed is to be at least partially grounded in “distinctive social patterns” (2017: 2454). And Griffith suggests that socially constructed identity facts, such as facts about gender, race, class, and disability, have distinctive social grounds:

What distinguishes socially constructed identities from other cases of social grounding (e.g., normative or aesthetic facts), is not the *way* in which they are grounded but rather their *grounds*, i.e., the ‘particular features of social reality’ serving as their grounds.
(Griffith 2018b: 395, emphasis in original)

However, Schaffer does not attempt to specify which distinctive social patterns serve as partial grounds of socially constructed facts. And while Griffith does specify the distinctive social grounds of socially constructed identity facts, his account is not meant to apply to the whole gamut of socially constructed facts. So, before we can evaluate the strategy of delineating socially constructed facts in terms of their distinctive social grounds, we need to consider what these distinctive grounds might be.

One promising proposal, which draws on Griffith's and Schaffer's discussions, is that the grounds of socially constructed facts involve complex, repeated patterns of social interaction which are neither natural nor inevitable.²⁴ The resulting analysis of social construction is as follows:

(SC-GROUNDS₁) What it is for a fact φ to be socially constructed is for it to be at least partially grounded in some social facts I whose obtaining involves complex, repeated patterns of social interaction which are neither natural nor inevitable.

SC-GROUNDS₁ avoids both of our problem cases: The existence of singleton Supreme Court is grounded in the existence of the Supreme Court, and the obtaining of this latter fact does not involve any complex, repeated patterns of social interaction (even if this fact itself is grounded in facts whose obtaining does involve such patterns).²⁵ And while it is plausible to suppose that the social facts which ground the bees' way of life do involve complex, repeated patterns of social interaction, these patterns of interaction are inevitable and natural in the relevant sense. So,

²⁴ Schaffer expresses sympathy for the idea that the distinctive social patterns which partially ground socially constructed facts are "complex, repeated patterns of social interaction" (2017: 2455, n. 7), while Griffith maintains that socially constructed identity facts are at least partially grounded in "specific, repeated patterns of human interaction" which involve "individual or collective responses to the subject's body (or perception thereof)" that are "not inevitable, natural, or fixed" (2018b: 395). Neither of these proposals on its own is viable if the aim is to delineate the whole gamut of socially constructed facts. The former does not avoid the bee colony problem case, while the latter is inapplicable to many socially constructed facts, such as the fact that Obama is a US citizen.

²⁵ If the existence of the Supreme Court is grounded in facts whose obtaining involves patterns of social interaction of the requisite sort, then the existence of singleton Supreme Court is *mediately* grounded in such facts. However, this does not suffice to make the fact socially constructed by the lights of SC-GROUNDS₁, since this proposal appeals to *immediate* ground.

according to SC-GROUNDS₁, neither the existence of singleton Supreme Court nor the fact that honeybees live in colonies is socially constructed.

However, SC-GROUNDS₁ does not avoid a variant of the first problem case (cf. Passinsky 2020: 511; Pagano 2021: 1656). Consider some social fact s whose obtaining involves complex, repeated patterns of social interaction which are neither inevitable nor natural. The existence of the singleton of s is grounded in the existence of s , i.e., in s 's obtaining. But s 's obtaining involves complex, repeated patterns of social interaction which are neither inevitable nor natural. So, according to SC-GROUNDS₁, the existence of singleton s is socially constructed. This is just as counterintuitive as the earlier claim that the existence of singleton Supreme Court is socially constructed.

An alternative proposal, which draws on Schaffer's (2019) rules-and-moves model of social reality, holds that socially constructed facts are grounded in the existence of 'background' social rules together with 'foreground' facts that 'make the move' which generates the grounded output against the background of the rules.²⁶ This proposal yields the following analysis of social construction:

(SC-GROUNDS₂) What it is for a fact φ to be socially constructed is for it to be grounded in some foreground facts Γ together with the existence of a background social rule R which links Γ with φ .

²⁶ Note that Schaffer does not propose to analyze social construction in terms of rules and moves. Rather, he suggests that certain aspects of social reality, including "some of the most politically important cases of social construction, such as gender, race, and sexuality," can be modeled in terms of rules and moves (Schaffer 2019: 754).

Like the previous proposal, SC-GROUNDS₂ avoids both of our original problem cases: The existence of singleton Supreme Court is not partially grounded in the existence of a social rule of the requisite sort. And likewise for the fact that honeybees live in colonies. Moreover, this proposal avoids the problem raised for the previous proposal because there is no singleton set whose existence is grounded in some facts F together with the existence of a social rule of the requisite sort.²⁷

The trouble is that this proposal arguably fails to account for some paradigm cases of social construction. Consider, for example, the fact that Kamala is a woman. There is widespread agreement among philosophers of gender that this fact is socially constructed. Yet according to prevailing conceptions of social rules in the social ontology literature, there is no social rule which links some foreground facts with Kamala's being a woman.²⁸ Thus, on a Searlean conception, the existence of a 'constitutive' social rule of the form ' X counts as Y in context C ' requires collective acceptance of the rule (Searle 1995: ch. 2). However, there is significant conflict and contestation over who counts as a woman in, say, the United States or the United Kingdom—and not just on the margins. Since the requisite collective acceptance is lacking, there is no constitutive social rule in place in these societies which specifies who counts as a woman. Similarly, on a Hartean conception, the existence of a social rule among a group of people requires widespread acceptance of the rule as a standard of conduct for oneself and others in the

²⁷ One might wonder whether there is a doubleton set of the requisite sort. I think that the best candidate would be a set whose members are some foreground fact f and some background social rule R which links f with the existence of the doubleton. But I doubt that there are any such social rules pertaining to doubletons. And if there are no such social rules, then there is no such doubleton set.

²⁸ Cf. Pagano (2021: 1662), who argues that the rules-and-moves view cannot accommodate the construction of womanhood. The gist of her argument is that social rules are commonly thought to obtain in virtue of collective acceptance, which is an intentional attitude. But the conditions for being a woman are not intentionally accepted.

group as well as general conformity to the rule (Hart 1961/2012: 55–7). But again, there is not such widespread acceptance or general conformity when it comes to who gets to count as a woman.²⁹

A proponent of SC-GROUNDS₂ could deal with this worry by modifying the account so that it appeals to background *social facts* rather than background social rules. The modified account would have it that what it is for a fact φ to be socially constructed is for it to be grounded in some foreground facts F together with some background social fact B which links F with φ . But this modified account faces a new set-theoretic problem case. Let b be the fact that mathematicians collectively believe that the existence of sets is grounded in the existence of their members. Now consider the doubleton set whose members are b and the Supreme Court. The existence of this doubleton is grounded in the existence of b , i.e., in b 's obtaining, and the existence of the Supreme Court. But plausibly, the existence of the Supreme Court constitutes a foreground fact and b 's obtaining constitutes a background social fact which links this foreground fact with the existence of the doubleton. So, according to the modified account, the existence of the doubleton is socially constructed. And again, this is counterintuitive.

A different strategy, proposed by Emilie Pagano in her manuscript “The Social and the Socially Constructed,” is to add further constraints on the *grounded output* to distinguish cases of

²⁹ Brännmark (2019) argues that macro-level contestation of institutional phenomena such as racism and sexism is compatible with these phenomena being grounded on the micro-level in the existence of ‘social rules’ in the sense of regularities in people’s boundary-setting and boundary-upholding behaviors towards others. For example, sexism is grounded on the micro-level in a regularity in boundary-setting and boundary-upholding behaviors towards occupants of the social positions of *woman* and *man*, but that is compatible with people contesting the existence of sexism and the legitimacy of sexist norms on the macro-level. But a proponent of SC-GROUNDS₂ cannot appeal to Brännmark’s conception of social rules because Brännmark’s regularities do not link some further foreground facts with the grounded output, and so they are not of the right form to play the role of background social rules. Thanks to [reference omitted] for raising this issue.

social construction from other cases of grounding in the social. Specifically, Pagano suggests that the grounded output must itself be a social fact. This yields the following analysis of social construction:

(SC-GROUNDED) What it is for a fact φ to be socially constructed is for it to be a social fact that is at least partially grounded in some further social facts Γ .

It may be argued that SC-GROUNDED avoids our first problem case because the existence of singleton Supreme Court is plausibly taken to be a mathematical fact and not a social fact. For similar reasons, the proposal arguably avoids variants of the first problem case as well. However, it does not avoid our second problem case because the fact that honeybees live in colonies is itself a social fact: it concerns the social organization of honeybees and therefore satisfies our definition of a social fact (viz., a metaphysically contingent fact about the social world). Thus, the strategy of adding further constraints on the grounded output is no more successful than that of adding further constraints on the grounds.

5. The meta-ground solution

I would like to propose a new strategy for distinguishing cases of social construction from cases of mere partial grounding in the social. The intuitive idea is that cases of social construction involve a distinctively social *means of construction*.³⁰ Thus, Obama's being a US

³⁰ Schaffer floats a similar idea in a footnote, writing: "It seems to me now that what is distinctive about social construction may be understood in terms of the grounding principles ('laws of metaphysics') involved. The social facts ground the set-theoretic fact *via the principle*

citizen is constructed *by means of* our legal and social practices. In contrast, the existence of singleton Supreme Court is constructed by means of the axioms of set theory, and the fact that bees live in colonies is constructed by means of compositional principles which hold independently of us. In neither of these cases is there anything distinctively social about the means of construction.

To develop this idea more rigorously, I will appeal to the notion of meta-grounding, which is familiar from the grounding literature.³¹ Let us call any fact about what grounds what a ‘grounding fact’. For example, the fact that the existence of the Supreme Court grounds the existence of singleton Supreme Court is a grounding fact. Now we may ask what, if anything, grounds *this* fact? Let us call any such partial or full ground a ‘meta-ground’. More generally, we may take a meta-ground to be any partial or full ground of a grounding fact. The advantage of developing our idea in terms of meta-grounds—rather than, say, metaphysical laws, anchors, or essences—is that meta-grounding is just a kind of grounding. Thus, in appealing to meta-grounding, we do not incur any further ideological commitments. Our approach therefore has the potential of being attractive to a wide range of grounding theorists, who may differ in their other ideological commitments.

The basic idea, then, is that the distinctive feature of socially constructed facts is that their associated meta-grounds include a suitable connective social fact. More precisely:

of set formation, and ground the existential fact *via the principle of existential generalization*, while the principles involved in cases of social construction differ. The question then arises whether there is a distinctive pattern of principles—or collection of specific patterns—that characterizes social constructions specifically” (2019: 754, n. 10). However, Schaffer articulates this idea in terms of metaphysical laws and not meta-grounds, as I do in this paper. Furthermore, he does not attempt to specify what is distinctive about the metaphysical laws involved in cases of social construction.

³¹ See, e.g., Bennett (2011, 2017: ch. 7), Fine (2012), deRosset (2013), Dasgupta (2014), Litland (2017, 2020), and Sider (2020).

(SC-META-GROUNDS) What it is for a fact φ to be socially constructed is for it to be grounded in some facts Γ such that the fact that Γ grounds φ is itself at least partially grounded in some suitable connective social fact s .

Central to this proposal is the idea of a ‘suitable connective social fact’. I take this to be a social fact which connects or links up the facts Γ with the fact φ . This connection or link may take various forms. For instance, it may go via social rules or norms, laws, conventions, social practices, collective beliefs, or ideologies. Below, I give some concrete examples of suitable connective social facts in the case of Obama’s being a US citizen. But it is worth emphasizing at the outset that the details in any given case will depend upon one’s first-order view of the socially constructed phenomenon in question. I see it as a virtue of the present proposal that it is largely ecumenical with respect to such first-order views.

The key point of departure from our original proposal, SC, to the present proposal, SC-META-GROUNDS, is that the former locates the social in the grounds of socially constructed facts, whereas the latter locates it in the meta-grounds. This move is meant to capture the intuitive idea that socially constructed facts have a social means of construction. Another key difference is that SC does not require the social grounds to take any particular form, whereas SC-META-GROUNDS requires the social meta-grounds to take the form of suitable connective social facts. This move is meant to cash out the idea that socially constructed facts have a *distinctively* social means of construction, where the distinctive element is the involvement of social ‘linking facts’ which concern social rules or norms, laws, conventions, social practices, collective beliefs, ideologies, or the like.

There are several further points of departure from SC to SC-META-GROUNDS which bear commentary. First, SC requires that the facts in Γ be social, whereas SC-META-GROUNDS does not impose this requirement. The reason for this change is that some social constructionist views in the literature may be construed as fully grounding the possession of a certain socially constructed feature in the possession of some strictly biological or physical features. For example, Elizabeth Barnes's (2016: §1.5) social constructionist view of physical disability may be construed as fully grounding someone's being physically disabled in a given context in their being in a certain bodily state (e.g., Tammy Duckworth is physically disabled in the present-day US context in virtue of having lost both legs).³² To make room for this interpretation of Barnes's view—and other such views—I have dropped the requirement that the facts in Γ be social.

Second, SC only requires that φ be *partially* grounded in Γ , whereas SC-META-GROUNDS requires that φ be *fully* grounded in Γ . This change is related to the previous one. It is generally agreed that an adequate account of social construction should allow for socially constructed facts which are at least partially grounded in strictly biological or physical facts. Since SC requires that the facts in Γ be social, it can only accommodate such facts if it does not require that φ be fully grounded in Γ . In contrast, since SC-META-GROUNDS does not require that the facts in Γ be social, it can accommodate such facts even if it requires that φ be fully grounded in Γ . In the absence of any special reason to appeal to partial grounding in Γ , I have chosen to formulate SC-META-GROUNDS in terms of full grounding in Γ because I find it more intuitive to work with meta-grounds of full grounding facts rather than partial grounding facts.

³² I do not want to insist that this is the only plausible construal of Barnes's view, only that this is one plausible construal.

Let me now illustrate the proposal by showing how it can account for the paradigmatically socially constructed fact that Obama is a US citizen. Obama's being a US citizen is grounded in some facts F . Which facts these are is a matter for further debate, and it is something which is left open by SC-META-GROUNDS. Simplifying somewhat, one may take the full ground to be the fact that Obama was born in the United States (cf. Epstein 2015: ch. 6, ch. 9),³³ or this fact together with the existence of US citizenship laws which specify the eligibility requirements for being a US citizen (cf. Schaffer 2019).³⁴ Alternatively, fans of Ásta's (2018) conferralist account of social properties may take the full ground to be the fact that the relevant authorities recognize Obama as a US citizen on the basis of his having been born in the United States.

In any case, we may ask what, if anything, grounds the fact that Obama's being a US citizen is grounded thus-and-so? The answer, I submit, will appeal to some aspect of our legal and social practices, which links said grounds with Obama's being a US citizen. For example, if the full ground of Obama's being a US citizen is taken to be the fact that he was born in the United States, then the relevant grounding fact is plausibly at least partially grounded in the existence of pertinent US citizenship laws. If the full ground is instead taken to be the fact that Obama was born in the United States together with the existence of pertinent US citizenship laws, then the relevant grounding fact is plausibly at least partially grounded in the existence of a

³³ It may be objected that Obama's having been born in the United States cannot be the full ground of his being a US citizen because there are possible worlds in which Obama is born in the United States but the eligibility requirements for US citizenship differ from those in the actual world in such a way that he fails to be a US citizen. I will discuss this objection from grounding necessitation in section 6.

³⁴ These proposals ignore certain complexities, such as the fact that persons born in the United States to foreign diplomats or members of an occupying military do not meet the eligibility requirements for being a US citizen. Thanks to [reference omitted] for this point.

social practice of recognizing and treating people as US citizens if they meet the legally codified eligibility requirements for being a US citizen. And if the full ground is taken to be the fact that the relevant authorities recognize Obama as a US citizen on the basis of his having been born in the United States, then the relevant grounding fact is plausibly at least partially grounded in the fact that US citizenship laws specify that having been born in the United States is one of the ‘base properties’ for US citizenship. The important point is that on any of these views, the relevant grounding fact is at least partially grounded in a connective social fact which links the grounds with the grounded output. Thus, on any of these views, Obama’s being a US citizen is socially constructed by the lights of SC-META-GROUNDS.

Now let us consider how SC-META-GROUNDS resolves both of our problem cases. Consider first the singleton Supreme Court case. The existence of singleton Supreme Court is grounded in the existence of the Supreme Court. What, if anything, grounds the fact that it is so grounded? There are various views on this question in the literature, and I do not want to rely upon any particular view here.³⁵ Rather, what I want to point out is that given standard views in the philosophy of mathematics concerning sets, it would be highly implausible for the answer to appeal to any connective social facts. The reason for this has to do with the fact that grounding is an explanatory relation: the grounded is metaphysically explained by, or explicable on the basis of, its grounds. Since meta-grounding is a kind of grounding, meta-grounding is likewise explanatory. So, any meta-ground of a grounding fact must contribute to explaining, or backing an explanation of, that grounding fact. But given any standard view in the philosophy of mathematics concerning sets, such as platonism, intuitionism, or formalism, there is simply no plausible candidate for a social ‘linking fact’ which could play this explanatory role in the case at

³⁵ See Litland (2020) for a nice survey of the views on offer.

hand. Whatever it is on these views that explains why the existence of sets is grounded in the existence of their members, it is not some social rule or norm, legal rule, social convention, social practice, collective belief, ideology, or the like. Consequently, given any of these standard views, SC-META-GROUNDS has it that the existence of singleton Supreme Court is not socially constructed. Moreover, if it turns out that these standard views are wrong and that, say, the social practices of mathematicians explain why the existence of sets is grounded in the existence of their members, then it is very plausible to suppose that the existence of sets is socially constructed after all—much to our surprise. So, SC-META-GROUNDS also delivers the right result in this case.³⁶

Consider now the bee colony case. The fact that honeybees live in colonies is plausibly grounded in the fact that honeybees live close together in a cooperative arrangement that involves the performance of distinct social roles. What, if anything, grounds the fact that it is so grounded? Again, what I want to argue is that it is very plausible to suppose that the answer to this question will not appeal to any suitable connective social facts because there are no plausible candidates for such facts which could play the requisite explanatory role. The most promising candidate would be a fact which connects the fulfillment of the relevant roles with the existence of a colony. While such a fact could play the requisite explanatory role, it would not be a connective social fact in the relevant sense. The reason is that the connection between the fulfillment of the relevant roles and the existence of a colony is metaphysically necessary, arguably flowing from the essence of a colony or a metaphysical law pertaining to colonies. Thus, the connective fact in question is not a *social* fact (viz., a contingent fact about the social world). The only other candidate that I can think of is a fact about the linguistic rules governing

³⁶ Thanks to [reference omitted] for discussion of this point.

our usage of the expression ‘colony’. The problem is that the relevant grounding fact presumably obtained before we began using the expression ‘colony’; and it presumably obtains at possible worlds in which there are no humans with linguistic rules. This makes it hard to see how the linguistic fact in question could explain, or back an explanation of, the relevant grounding fact.³⁷ In the absence of other plausible candidates, we may conclude that whatever it is that explains the relevant grounding fact, it is not a connective social fact. And so, SC-META-GROUNDS has it that the fact that honeybees live in colonies is not socially constructed.

SC-META-GROUNDS also avoids the other problems faced by extant views. Unlike SC-GROUNDS₁, it avoids variants of the first problem case because there is no plausible candidate for a social ‘linking fact’ which could play the requisite explanatory role in any set-theoretic case. And unlike SC-GROUNDS₂, it can account for paradigm cases of social construction which do not involve any ‘linking’ social rules because it neither requires that φ be partially grounded in the existence of such a rule, nor that Γ grounds φ be partially grounded in the existence of such a rule. It only requires that Γ grounds φ be partially grounded in a suitable connective social fact, and this fact need not concern social rules. It may instead concern social phenomena such as social practices, collective beliefs, ideologies, and so forth. Plausibly, those cases of social construction which do not involve social rules do involve one of these other social phenomena.

One last virtue of SC-META-GROUNDS that I want to emphasize is that the account is compatible to a large extent with prevailing views on meta-grounding. First and foremost, it is compatible with the widely held view that if Γ grounds φ , then the fact that Γ grounds φ is itself

³⁷ Another reason why linguistic facts are not plausibly taken to be among the meta-grounds in this case is that it would be objectionably arbitrary to include them as meta-grounds in this case but not in other cases, such as the set-theoretic case. And including linguistic facts as meta-grounds in all cases would make grounding mind-dependent in a way that would be unacceptable to most grounding theorists.

at least partially grounded in Γ . The reason is that SC-META-GROUNDS holds that where φ is a socially constructed fact, the fact that Γ grounds φ is at least *partially* grounded in some suitable connective social fact s . This leaves it open that the fact that Γ grounds φ is also partially grounded in Γ .

Furthermore, SC-META-GROUNDS is perfectly compatible with Theodore Sider's (2020) unsystematic account of meta-grounding, according to which there is no simple and general answer to the question of what grounds grounding facts. Sider suggests that various kinds of facts may help to ground grounding facts, including patterns in what actually happens, modal facts, facts about the form or constituents of the grounding fact in question, metalinguistic facts, and facts about fundamentality. A proponent of SC-META-GROUNDS may simply add connective social facts to this list.

Finally, SC-META-GROUNDS is consistent with extant systematic accounts of meta-grounding, on one standard way of construing these accounts.³⁸ Consider, for example, Upwards Anti-Primitivism, which holds that if Γ grounds φ , then the fact that Γ grounds φ is itself grounded in Γ (Bennett 2011; deRosset 2013; Litland 2017). It is important to distinguish two different versions of this view. The first says that Γ is the *one and only* full, immediate ground of Γ grounds φ . The second says that Γ is *a* full, immediate ground of Γ grounds φ .³⁹ While the former rules out the possibility of 'grounding overdetermination' in cases of meta-grounding, the latter does not. Since grounding theorists typically allow for grounding overdetermination in some cases of first-order grounding—for example, in the case of disjunctions and existential generalizations—the second version is plausibly taken to be the default. And this version is

³⁸ Thanks to [reference omitted] for helpful discussion of the ideas in this paragraph.

³⁹ In the literature, these two different versions of the view are often conflated.

consistent with SC-META-GROUNDS because this view also does not preclude the possibility of overdetermining meta-grounds. Thus, a proponent of both views could hold that where φ is a socially constructed fact, the fact that Γ grounds φ is fully, immediately grounded in Γ and fully, immediately grounded in some facts which include a suitable connective social fact.⁴⁰ For similar reasons, SC-META-GROUNDS is also consistent with other extant systematic accounts of meta-grounding, so long as these other accounts are construed as not precluding the possibility of overdetermining meta-grounds.⁴¹

6. Objections and replies

Let me conclude by addressing two important potential objections to SC-META-GROUNDS. The first concerns grounding necessitation, which is a widely accepted principle of grounding. There are various ways of formulating grounding necessitation, but one common formulation says that if Γ fully grounds φ , then necessarily, if the facts in Γ obtain then φ obtains. Since SC-META-GROUNDS is itself neutral on the question of what grounds socially constructed facts, it does not directly violate grounding necessitation. Nevertheless, it may be thought that any plausible application of this view to concrete cases of social construction will

⁴⁰ This combination of views does, however, face a new set-theoretic problem case. Let b be the fact that mathematicians collectively believe that the existence of sets is grounded in the existence of their members. Now consider the singleton set whose sole member is b . The existence of this set is grounded in the existence of b . By Upwards Anti-Primitivism, the fact that singleton b is so grounded is itself grounded in the existence of b . But the existence of b is a social fact that connects itself with the existence of its singleton. So, by SC-META-GROUNDS, the existence of singleton b is socially constructed. To avoid this counterintuitive result, a proponent of Upwards Anti-Primitivism could add a further condition to SC-META-GROUNDS, namely that connective social fact s must not itself be a member of Γ . Since the existence of b grounds the existence of singleton b , this condition would not be met in the case at hand.

⁴¹ For other systematic accounts of meta-grounding, see Dasgupta (2014) and Litland (2017).

violate this principle. Thus, consider again Obama's being a US citizen. Earlier, I suggested that one may take the full ground of this fact to be the fact that Obama was born in the United States. But Obama's having been born in the United States fails to necessitate his being a US citizen, since there are possible worlds in which the eligibility requirements for US citizenship differ from those in the actual world in such a way that Obama fails to qualify as a US citizen despite having been born in the United States.⁴² Similarly, it may be thought that the other views canvassed earlier of the full grounds of Obama's being a US citizen also fail to necessitate his being a US citizen.

The first thing to say in response is that grounding necessitation is not a sacrosanct principle. Indeed, the grounding literature already contains many independent arguments against it.⁴³ Furthermore, the principle is oftentimes motivated by a narrow range of examples, such as facts about sets, disjunctions, and conjunctions. When the range of examples is broadened to include socially constructed facts, the principle loses some of its intuitive appeal—or so it seems to me. That being said, it is not my aim here to persuade fans of necessitation to give up this principle. Instead, what I want to argue is that SC-META-GROUNDS can be implemented in a way that respects necessitation, and so fans of this principle need not reject my proposal. Thus, consider again the second view canvassed earlier, according to which Obama's being a US citizen is fully grounded in his having been born in the United States together with the existence

⁴² Analogous views of the full grounds of some other socially constructed facts will even violate temporal and locational analogues of necessitation. For example, if one takes the full grounds of facts about racial classification to be given by the content of pertinent laws or social norms, then one will have to deny the temporal and locational constancy of grounding in the actual world because schemes of racial classification have varied across times and locations in the actual world. Thanks to [reference omitted] for this point.

⁴³ See, e.g., Leuenberger (2014), Skiles (2015), and Zangwill (2018). See Skiles (2020: §2) for a helpful overview. See also Epstein (2015: ch. 6) for an account that is plausibly construed as denying necessitation as well as its temporal and locational analogues.

of US citizenship laws which specify the eligibility requirements for being a US citizen.

Intuitively, any possible world in which these full grounds obtain is a world in which Obama is a US citizen, and so the principle of grounding necessitation is respected.

However, one may attempt to rebut this intuition with the following argument. The view under consideration has it that the relevant grounding fact—viz., the fact that Obama's being a US citizen is grounded in his having been born in the United States together with the existence of the relevant US citizenship laws—is itself at least partially grounded in the existence of a social practice of recognizing and treating people as US citizens if they meet the legally codified eligibility requirements for being a US citizen. But presumably, it is possible that Obama is born in the United States and the relevant US citizenship laws exist, but this social practice does not obtain (and no suitable replacement obtains). Although the US citizenship laws remain 'on the books' as it were, they are not generally obeyed and they have no implications for how rights and duties are distributed among members of the population. In this situation, Obama's having been born in the United States together with the existence of the relevant US citizenship laws does not ground his being a US citizen, since part of the meta-ground of this would-be grounding fact is missing. Assuming that in this situation there are no suitable replacement grounds for Obama's being a US citizen, he is not a US citizen. Thus, Obama's having been born in the United States together with the existence of the relevant US citizenship laws fails to necessitate his being a US citizen after all.

In response, I contend that this argument falters for two reasons. First, even if we grant that it is possible that Obama is born in the United States and the US citizenship laws exist but the relevant social practice does not obtain (and no suitable replacement obtains), it does not follow that in this situation Obama's having been born in the United States together with the

existence of the relevant US citizenship laws does not ground his being a US citizen. The reason is that SC-META-GROUNDS allows for the possibility of overdetermining meta-grounds, as we noted earlier. And if there are overdetermining meta-grounds in this case, then the relevant grounding fact could obtain even if one of its actual full meta-grounds does not obtain (and no suitable replacement obtains). Second, and more importantly, I maintain that it is not possible that Obama is born in the United States and the US citizenship laws exist, but the social practice does not obtain. The reason is that the existence of the US citizenship laws *necessarily entails* the existence of the social practice: if there is no widespread and general practice of recognizing and treating people as US citizens when they meet the legally codified eligibility requirements for being a US citizen, then the US citizenship laws cannot be said to ‘exist’ in the relevant sense of being in force.⁴⁴

The second objection concerns the issue of ‘exportation’.⁴⁵ In an influential argument, Epstein contends that ‘grounding-only’ approaches to social reality such as Schaffer’s (2019) cannot account for an important feature of social kinds—namely, that social kinds whose instantiation conditions are anchored in the goings-on of the actual world can still be instantiated at possible worlds in which these anchors do not obtain (Epstein 2015: 123–4, 2019: 771–2). To illustrate, suppose that the instantiation conditions of the kind *war criminal* are anchored in statutes of the International Criminal Court which specify the conditions for being a war criminal. Now, consider a possible world w in which Genghis Khan commits all of his atrocities but there is no ICC. Epstein argues that Khan would still be a war criminal at w , but that grounding-only views such as Schaffer’s cannot account for this. For according to such views,

⁴⁴ Thanks to [reference omitted] for helpful discussion of this point.

⁴⁵ The terminology of ‘exportation’ is due to Schaffer (2019).

Khan's being a war criminal is partially grounded in the existence of the relevant ICC statutes. And plausibly, unless a grounded output concerns the goings-on at other worlds, it does not obtain at worlds in which part of its actual full ground is missing (unless a suitable replacement obtains, or there is an overdetermining ground). Given that Khan's being a war criminal does not involve the goings-on at other worlds, and that the relevant ICC statutes do not exist in w (and no suitable replacement exists, and there is no overdetermination), it follows that Khan is not a war criminal at w . A similar argument can be marshalled against some implementations of my meta-ground proposal, including an implementation which takes the existence of the relevant ICC statutes to partially ground someone's being a war criminal and one which takes the existence of these statutes to be part of the one and only full meta-ground of the fact that someone's being a war criminal is grounded thus-and-so.

My response to this objection is three-pronged. First, some social kinds evidently cannot be instantiated at possible worlds in which the relevant anchors do not obtain and no suitable replacement obtains (cf. Hawley 2019: 225–6; Schaffer 2019: 765; Pagano 2024: 89; Chilovi ms). For example, the kind *US citizen* cannot be instantiated at worlds in which there are no US citizenship laws and no suitable replacement (such as codes or customs laying down the requirements for being a US citizen). The aforementioned implementations of my meta-ground proposal are consistent with this observation. Second, since my meta-ground proposal only pertains to the socially constructed and not to the (merely) social, it has no implications whatsoever for the 'exportability' of social kinds which are not socially constructed. Thus, it is compatible with my view that all of these social kinds 'export' across worlds. Third and lastly, Schaffer's 'relations reply' to Epstein's objection (2019: 763–5) is also available to a proponent of my meta-ground proposal. According to this reply, apparently monadic social properties such

as *being a war criminal* are in fact relational properties which involve a relation to a social rule (e.g., *being a war criminal by the statutes of the ICC*). Consequently, socially constructed facts such as Khan's being a war criminal at *w* do involve the goings-on at other worlds (namely, the actual world), contra what we had supposed. My suggestion, then, is that after we siphon off the social kinds which do not 'export', all remaining cases of 'exportation' can be accounted for in terms of social facts which are not socially constructed or socially constructed facts which involve relations to social rules. Epstein's exportation objection is thereby answered.

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