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SOCIAL ENTITIES

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In recent years, there has been an increased interest in applying the tools and methods of analytic metaphysics to the study of social phenomena. This chapter examines how one such tool—the notion of *metaphysical ground*—may be used to elucidate some central notions, debates, and positions in the philosophy of race and gender, social ontology, and the philosophy of social science. Three main applications are examined: how the notion of social construction may be analyzed in ground-theoretic terms (§1); how debates over the nature of social facts may be recast as grounding debates (§2); and how the doctrine of ontological individualism may be formulated using the notion of ground (§3). The chapter concludes by considering a skeptical challenge concerning the usefulness of the grounding framework for social metaphysics (§4).

1. Social Construction

The notion of *social construction* figures prominently in discussions of race and gender, as well as in discussions of other phenomena such as disability and mental illness. For instance, many feminists have maintained that gender is not a biological or anatomical phenomenon but a social construct.[1] Race theorists argue over whether human races are biologically real or socially constructed.[2] And some critics of the scientific mainstream have claimed that mental illnesses such as schizophrenia are socially constructed.[3] In order to understand these various positions and debates, we need to understand what it is for something to be socially constructed. Yet there is little consensus in the literature on how this notion (or cluster of notions) is to be understood.[4]

Grounding theorists have proposed that the notion of ground may be used to analyze one important notion of social construction (Schaffer 2017; Griffith 2018). The relevant notion is that of *constitutive* social construction, which is to be distinguished from *causal* social construction.[5] Roughly, something is causally socially constructed just in case it is caused by social factors, whereas something is constitutively socially constructed just in case it is constituted by social factors. To illustrate, consider the fact that males are on average taller than females. Some feminists have argued that this fact is causally socially constructed insofar as it is the product of a long history of differing social norms for males and females when it comes to nutrition and exercise.[6] However, the fact is not constitutively socially constructed, since differences in height are not constituted by differences in social features but rather differences in physical features.

The basic ground-theoretic proposal is that the notion of constitutive social construction may be analyzed in terms of the notion of ground. The two specific proposals in the literature, due to Jonathan Schaffer and Aaron Griffith, differ over the details. Schaffer suggests that "to be socially constructed is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns," leaving open what those distinctive social patterns are (2017: 2454–2455). Since Schaffer is working with a notion of entity grounding, his proposal pertains to entities of all sorts including facts, objects, properties, etc. Griffith is specifically concerned with the construction of social identities such as gender, race, class, and disability. He suggests that a person S is non-causally socially constructed as a member of human social kind K if and only if the fact that S is a K is at least partly grounded in particular features of social reality (2018: 395). For example, Sally is non-causally socially constructed as a woman if and only if the fact that Sally is a woman is at least partly grounded in particular features of social reality. Griffith adds that the relevant particular features of social reality are "specific, repeated patterns of human interaction" that involve "individual or collective responses to the subject's body (or perception thereof)," and are "not inevitable, natural, or fixed" (2018: 395).

One central motivation for a ground-theoretic analysis of social construction along these lines is that many social constructionists wish to maintain that socially constructed entities are real, despite being socially constructed (cf. Griffith 2018: §§1–2). But as Ian Hacking notes, '"Social construct' and 'real' do seem terribly at odds with each other" (1999: 101). The ground-theoretic analysis gives social constructionists a way to resolve this apparent tension. Since the grounded exists, social constructionists may maintain that the socially constructed is 'real' in the sense that it exists. At the same time, since the grounded is derivative of more fundamental features of reality, social constructionists can acknowledge that the socially constructed is not part of the fundamental furniture of reality.

Other considerations that favor a ground-theoretic analysis of social construction are of a broader theoretical character. First, the ground-theoretic analysis successfully integrates social construction into a more general metaphysics (Schaffer 2017: §2.3; Griffith 2018: §3). Second, the analysis is able to account for the inferential role of social construction. In particular, it is able to account for the inferences that we draw from something's being socially constructed to its being nonfundamental and generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social factors (Schaffer 2017: §2.3). Third, the analysis provides social constructionists with a rigorous set of conceptual tools that are useful for articulating various further social constructionist claims and commitments (Griffith 2018: §3).[7]

Since the literature on this topic is at a nascent stage, there are many open questions that merit further investigation. I will mention three here. First, how do we distinguish cases of social construction from other cases of grounding in the social? After all, not every case of grounding in the social is a case of social construction, at least as this notion is typically understood. For example, the existence of the singleton of the Supreme Court is grounded in the social, but it is not socially constructed (cf. Schaffer 2017: 2455). The grounding theorist has at least four options for dealing with this issue. Option 1 is to say that what distinguishes cases of social construction is something about the *grounds* (Griffith 2018: 395; cf. Schaffer 2017: §2.2). But it is unclear whether a view of this sort can avoid the problem raised by the singleton Supreme Court example. For suppose it is agreed that being grounded in the existence of social pattern P suffices for being socially constructed. The existence of the singleton of P is grounded in the existence of P, yet it is not socially constructed. Option 2 distinguishes cases of social construction by reference to the *grounded*. For instance, it might be maintained that an object *x* is socially constructed just in case its essence is grounded in the social. Provided that the essence of singleton Supreme Court is not grounded in the social, singleton Supreme Court would

not count as socially constructed on this proposal. Option 3 appeals to the *variety of grounding* that is involved. On this proposal, cases of social construction involve a distinct variety of social grounding, whereas cases like that of singleton Supreme Court do not. Finally, Option 4 distinguishes cases of social construction via the *grounding connection*. The basic idea here is that in the case of singleton Supreme Court, the existence of the Supreme Court grounds the existence of singleton Supreme Court on the basis of set-theoretic principles. In contrast, in cases of social construction, the grounding connection has its basis in social principles, rules, or mechanisms. This idea could be implemented in various ways. For instance, the relevant principles, rules, or mechanisms might figure in laws of metaphysics, essentialist truths, or meta-grounds, which in turn account for the grounding connection.

Another important question is whether a ground-theoretic analysis of social construction is superior to alternative analyses. A salient competitor is Sally Haslanger's definitional analysis, which says that "something is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors" (Haslanger 1995: 98). One way to understand this proposal is in terms of the notion of *real definition*. Real definitions are definitions of things themselves, as opposed to definitions of words or concepts. For instance, the number 1 itself might be defined as the successor of 0 (Fine 1994: 14). Using this notion of real definition, we may restate Haslanger's proposal as follows: something is constitutively socially constructed iff its real definition makes reference to social factors.[8] Such a real definition analysis of social construction shares many of the virtues of a ground-theoretic analysis. For instance, it successfully integrates social construction into the more general metaphysical framework of real definition; and it is able to account for the inferences that we draw from something's being socially constructed to its being explicable on the basis of social factors. One question for future research is whether there are considerations that favor a ground-theoretic analysis over a real definition analysis. Another question is whether the ground-theoretic analysis and the real definition analysis are even genuine competitors. If, for instance, real definition itself is to be analyzed in terms of ground (cf. Rosen 2015), then the analyses may not be genuine competitors after all.[9]

A more general question inspired by the ground-theoretic analysis of social construction is whether other central notions of social theory can also be analyzed in ground-theoretic terms. As an example, I will consider the notion of *intersectionality*, which plays an important role in discussions of categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. The basic idea put forward by intersectionality theorists is that the oppression associated with membership in some such category can 'intersect' with the oppression associated with membership in another such category, thereby producing a new and different form of oppression that cannot be understood in simple additive terms. For example, black women may face a form of oppression that cannot be understood by simply analyzing the oppression faced by women and the oppression faced by black people. Sara Bernstein (2020: §3) proposes that intersectionality may be understood in terms of the ontological and explanatory priority of the intersectional category over its constituent categories. For instance, the intersectionality of black womanhood may be understood in terms of the ontological and explanatory priority of the category *black woman* over the categories *black* and *woman*. Since grounds are ontologically prior to the grounded and metaphysically explain the grounded, Bernstein's account of intersectionality may naturally be construed in grounding terms: what it is for a category φ to be intersectional is for φ's existence to partly ground the existence of its constituent categories. A question for future research is whether, and to what extent, the considerations adduced earlier in support of a ground-theoretic analysis of social construction also favor a ground-theoretic analysis of intersectionality or ground-theoretic analyses of other notions in social theory.

2. Social Facts

A central debate in social ontology concerns the nature of social facts and how these facts are 'built up' from more basic facts. This debate may be fruitfully recast in ground-theoretic terms (cf. Epstein 2015: ch. 6, 2016; Schaffer 2019). By way of illustration, let us consider the dispute between Ásta and John Searle over the nature of institutional social facts such as the fact that Trump is president of the United States, that I am a registered voter in Vermont, and that Obama is a U.S. citizen.

On Searle's account, such social facts are created and maintained through our collective acceptance of constitutive rules of the form *X counts as Y in C*, where '*X*' picks out a particular object or a class of objects that meet certain specified conditions; '*Y*' names a status with an associated function; and '*C*' names a context (Searle 1995: 27–29, 43–46). For example, the fact that Obama is a U.S. citizen is created and maintained through collective acceptance of a constitutive rule that says (roughly), 'Anyone who was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen counts as having the status function of U.S. citizen in the context of the United States.' On Ásta's account, such social facts are instead created and maintained by authorities conferring social statuses onto individuals that are taken to have the relevant 'base property,' which is the property that the authorities are attempting to track in their conferral (2018: §1.4; cf. Ásta 2013). Thus, the fact that Obama is a U.S. citizen is created and maintained by authorities conferring the status of U.S. citizen onto Obama, who is taken to have the relevant base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen.

Since Ásta and Searle formulate their accounts in terms of their own distinctive notions, it is not easy to pinpoint the main locus of disagreement. By recasting the debate as one over the grounds of institutional social facts, we can clarify what is in dispute. Letting '[*p*]' denote the fact that *p*, here is a natural way to recast the debate in grounding terms:

On Searle's account, [Obama is a U.S. citizen] is grounded in the following two facts:

> S-Ground-1 [The American people collectively accept a constitutive rule that says, 'Anyone who was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen counts as having the status function of U.S. citizen in the context of the United States']; and
> S-Ground-2 [Obama was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen].

Whereas on Ásta's account, [Obama is a U.S. citizen] is grounded in the following two:

> A-Ground-1 [When authorities are conferring the status of U.S. citizen, they are attempting to track the base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen]; and
> A-Ground-2 [The authorities take Obama to have the base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen].

When the debate is recast in this way, it becomes clear that one of the main points of contention is whether Obama's being a U.S. citizen depends upon his *actually* meeting the conditions laid down for U.S. citizenship, as per S-Ground-2, or upon his being *taken* to meet these conditions, as per A-Ground-2. These are two importantly different views of

citizenship, with differing real world implications. To illustrate, suppose that the relevant authorities mistakenly take person S to meet the conditions laid down for U.S. citizenship. On Ásta's account, S is a U.S. citizen, and may therefore be entitled to various benefits and privileges that come with U.S. citizenship. On Searle's account, S is not a U.S. citizen and has no such entitlements.

There are other ways in which one might try to recast the debate between Ásta and Searle in terms of grounding. I will discuss one prominent alternative, which is due to Brian Epstein (2015: ch. 6, 2016). Epstein proposes a grounding-framing-anchoring framework for social ontology, on which social facts are to be understood not only in terms of their grounds but also in terms of associated *frame principles* and *anchors*. On his view, the grounds of a social fact are the "metaphysical reason" that the fact obtains (2015: 76). A frame principle is a general principle that describes how facts of a certain form are grounded in possible worlds that are governed by the principle (2015: 77–80). In the case of U.S. citizenship facts such as [Obama is a U.S. citizen], the relevant frame principle will describe how facts of the form [*x* is a U.S. citizen] are grounded in worlds that are governed by the principle. Frame principles themselves are "put in place" by a set of facts (2015: 81). Epstein calls this putting-in-place relation 'anchoring,' and the facts that put in place a frame principle 'anchors.' He maintains that anchoring is distinct from grounding, but notes that the two relations are similar insofar as the anchors of a frame principle are the "metaphysical reason" that the frame principle is the case (2015: 82). On Epstein's framework, the debate between Ásta and Searle may be recast as follows:[10]

On Searle's account:

S-Ground [Obama is a U.S. citizen] is fully grounded in [Obama was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen];
S-Frame The relevant frame principle is: $(\forall x)$(*x* was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen $\rightarrow$ [*x* was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen] fully grounds [*x* is a U.S. citizen]);
S-Anchor The relevant frame principle is anchored in [The American people collectively accept a constitutive rule that says, 'Anyone who was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen counts as having the status function of U.S. citizen in the context of the United States'].

Whereas on Ásta's account:

A-Ground [Obama is a U.S. citizen] is fully grounded in [The authorities take Obama to have the base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen];
A-Frame The relevant frame principle is: $(\forall x)$(The authorities take *x* to have the base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen $\rightarrow$ [The authorities take *x* to have the base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen] fully grounds [*x* is a U.S. citizen]);
A-Anchor The relevant frame principle is anchored in [When authorities are conferring the status of U.S. citizen, they are attempting to track the base property of having been born in the United States or being the child of a U.S. citizen or having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen].

This alternative ground-theoretic reconstrual of the dispute between Ásta and Searle prompts a number of interesting questions that warrant further consideration. First, do we need to posit a relation of anchoring in addition to the relation of grounding in order to adequately represent such debates in social ontology? Or can grounding alone do the job? (cf. Hawley 2019; Mikkola 2019; Schaffer 2019) This question largely turns on whether anchoring can be construed as a *form* of grounding. The following two considerations favor treating anchoring as a form of grounding. First, the two relations play a very similar role. As Epstein himself acknowledges, anchors are the 'metaphysical reason' for why the anchored obtains, just as grounds are the 'metaphysical reason' for why the grounded obtains. Second, by treating anchoring as a form of grounding, we avoid positing a *sui generis* relation that obtains only in the social domain (Schaffer 2019: §2.3).[11]

If anchoring is taken to be a form of grounding, then a further choice point is whether to treat anchors as *partial grounds* of the associated social facts or as *meta-grounds* of the associated grounding facts. To illustrate, consider again Searle's account of [Obama is a U.S. citizen]. On the partial ground view, this fact is partly grounded in the collective acceptance of the relevant constitutive rule (as per my initial proposal). On the meta-ground view, this fact is fully grounded in [Obama was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen]. But the fact that [Obama is a U.S. citizen] is grounded in [Obama was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen] is itself grounded in the collective acceptance of the relevant constitutive rule.

The following two arguments support the partial ground view. First, the meta-ground view violates grounding necessitation, which is a widely endorsed principle (cf. Schaffer 2019: 757).[12] Grounding necessitation says that the full grounds of a fact necessitate that fact. But on the meta-ground view, the full grounds of [Obama is a U.S. citizen] clearly do not necessitate that fact. Sticking with Searle's account, there are metaphysically possible worlds in which [Obama was born in the United States or is the child of a U.S. citizen or has been naturalized as a U.S. citizen] obtains, but [Obama is a U.S. citizen] does not obtain. For instance, a world in which the one and only condition laid down for U.S. citizenship is having been born in Washington, DC. The partial ground view does not likewise violate grounding necessitation, as it includes facts concerning the conditions laid down for U.S. citizenship in the full grounds. Second, the meta-ground view is at odds with some of our intuitions about what grounds what. For example, suppose that persons A and B agree that whatever they point to is to be the border between their territories. They then point to a particular river, R. On the meta-ground view, [A and B pointed to R] is the full ground of [R constitutes the border], whereas the fact of A and B's agreement is the meta-ground of the relevant grounding fact. But intuitively, A and B's having pointed to R does not by itself metaphysically explain why R constitutes the border between their territories. The partial ground view avoids this clash with intuition by identifying a further ground for [R constitutes the border], namely the fact of A and B's agreement.

However, the partial ground view faces the following challenge, which is raised by Epstein (2015: 123–124).[13] For some social kinds, it can be a meaningful and substantive question whether something or someone is a member of the kind even at times and worlds at which the relevant anchors do not obtain. For example, consider the kind *war criminal*. It can be a meaningful and substantive question whether Genghis Khan was a war criminal, even though the relevant anchors—facts concerning certain statutes of the International Criminal Court (ICC), say—did not obtain at the time that Genghis Khan committed his crimes. But arguably, the partial ground view cannot account for this. For if the relevant anchors are partial grounds of facts of the form [*x* is a war criminal], then the question of whether Genghis Khan was a war

criminal seems trivial: he was not, since the ICC did not even exist at the time that he committed his crimes.

I will mention two possible lines of response to this challenge. The first says that social kinds such as *war criminal* are fundamentally different from social kinds such as *U.S. citizen*. Whereas the latter have associated anchors that partly ground the relevant social facts, the former do not. What appear to be anchors in the former cases are actually the grounds of real definitions. For example, facts concerning the relevant statutes of the ICC do not anchor facts of the form [*x* is a war criminal]. Rather, these facts ground the real definition of the kind *war criminal*. Thus, *what it is* to be a war criminal is to have committed any of the crimes listed in the statutes. In contrast, it is not the case that *what it is* to be a U.S. citizen is to have been born in the United States or be the child of a U.S. citizen or have been naturalized as a U.S. citizen. Rather, *what it is* to be a U.S. citizen is to play a certain social role and have certain rights, duties, and obligations. Since on this proposal the partial ground view only applies to 'anchored' social kinds such as *U.S. citizen* and not 'defined' social kinds such as *war criminal*, the challenge is averted.

The second response denies that the partial ground theorist is committed to saying that Genghis Khan was not a war criminal because the ICC did not exist at the time that he committed his crimes. The idea here is that Genghis Khan's being a war criminal *back then* may be partly grounded in the goings-on of *today*. Such cases of facts being grounded in temporally later facts are not unfamiliar. For example, suppose that Sally scores the winning goal in the second quarter of the game. Then [Sally scored the winning goal] is partly grounded in facts that obtained after Sally scored the winning goal, for instance, [Sally's team won the game]. Of course, the property of being a war criminal is not obviously tied to the goings-on of today in the way that the property of scoring the winning goal is obviously tied to the outcome of the game. But this apparent difference might be explained away by construing the property of being a war criminal in such a way that it is more obviously tied to the goings-on of today. For instance, it might be maintained that strictly speaking, the property in question is that of being a war criminal by the standards of the ICC (cf. Schaffer 2019: 763–764). Since on this proposal Genghis Khan's being a war criminal may be partly grounded in present-day facts concerning the ICC, the partial ground theorist can allow that it is a meaningful and substantive question whether Genghis Khan was a war criminal.

If the partial ground view is adopted, then a further question is whether to draw some alternative theoretical distinction between what we have been calling 'anchors' and 'grounds.' Here the grounding theorist may be able to draw on discussions in the metaphysics of causation, where distinctions have been drawn between different kinds of causal conditions. For instance, background causal conditions are sometimes distinguished from foreground causal conditions. Consider, for example, the striking of a match. The striking of the match is the foreground causal condition of the burning of the match, whereas the presence of oxygen is a background causal condition. Similarly, a proponent of the partial ground view could take 'grounds' to be foreground grounds and 'anchors' to be background grounds.[14]

To sum up: there are a number of outstanding questions regarding how to best recast debates over the nature of social facts in ground-theoretic terms. First and foremost, do we need to posit a relation of anchoring in addition to grounding, as Epstein suggests? If not, should anchors be construed as partial grounds of the relevant social facts or as meta-grounds of the relevant grounding facts? And if anchors are construed as partial grounds, then should some alternative theoretical distinction be drawn between 'anchors' and 'grounds'? As yet, there is no consensus on the answers to these questions.

3. Ontological Individualism

The last application of grounding that I will consider pertains to the philosophy of social science. A central and longstanding debate in this area is the debate between methodological individualists and holists.[15] Historically, this debate centered on methodological issues in the social sciences, but it was deeply enmeshed with ontological issues. In more recent discussions, the methodological issues are usually disentangled from the ontological issues. The methodological debate centers on the question of whether explanations in the social sciences should only make reference to individuals and their interactions, or whether these explanations can also legitimately make reference to 'higher-level' social entities such as nations, political parties, classes, ethnic groups, and cultures. The explanatory individualist insists on individualistic explanations, whereas the explanatory holist allows for non-individualistic explanations. The ontological debate, on the other hand, centers on the question of whether social facts are fully determined by and dependent on 'individualistic facts,' viz. facts about individuals and their interactions. The ontological individualist says yes, whereas the ontological holist says no.

The notion of ground may be used to elucidate the doctrine of ontological individualism (and its negation, ontological holism). In particular, ontological individualism may be construed as a thesis about the individualistic grounds of social facts (Epstein 2015: ch. 8).[16] There are various possibilities for how to formulate this thesis more precisely in ground-theoretic terms (cf. Epstein 2015: 109–110), but here is one natural formulation:

OI-Ground Necessarily, any social fact *f* is fully grounded in some individualistic facts.

Since grounding is a relation of both dependence (the grounded depends upon the grounds) and determination (the grounds determine the grounded), OI-Ground captures the idea that social facts are fully determined by and dependent on individualistic facts.

In contrast, standard formulations of ontological individualism in the contemporary literature do not adequately capture the relevant dependence and determination (cf. Epstein 2014: §1.1). These standard formulations are cast in terms of supervenience. For instance, Philip Pettit says that individualism "insists on the supervenience claim that if we replicate how things are with and between individuals, then we will replicate all the social realities that obtain in their midst: there are no social properties or powers that will be left out" (2003: 191). And Christian List and Kai Spiekermann formulate the relevant doctrine of individualism thus: "The individual-level facts fully determine the social facts; i.e., any possible worlds that are identical with respect to all individual-level facts will necessarily be identical with respect to all social facts" (2013: 632). But as many have noted, the relation of supervenience is too course-grained to adequately capture dependence and determination. Consider, for example, the mathematical Platonist. She would presumably agree that any possible worlds that are identical with respect to all physical facts will necessarily be identical with respect to all mathematical facts. Nevertheless, she would deny that the mathematical facts are determined by, or dependent on, the physical facts. Since a ground-theoretic formulation of ontological individualism does adequately capture the relevant dependence and determination, it is preferable to a supervenience-based formulation.

4. Skeptical Doubts

As we have seen, a number of philosophers have championed applications of grounding to the study of social phenomena. Others, however, have raised skeptical doubts about the usefulness of the grounding framework for social metaphysics (Barnes 2014, 2017; Mikkola 2015, 2017). In

this concluding section, I consider one important skeptical challenge raised by Elizabeth Barnes (2014). The challenge is that the grounding framework cannot adequately represent many of the central debates and positions within social ontology and feminist metaphysics, because these debates are not about what grounds what. As an example, Barnes considers the dispute between Sally Haslanger and Katharine Jenkins about the nature of gender. On Haslanger's view:

> S is a woman iff$_{df}$ S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction.
> *(Haslanger 2000: 39)*

Jenkins (2016) argues that this definition is inadequate because it excludes some *prima facie* women, namely trans women who don't regularly 'pass' as cis women. Her competing proposal is that in addition to Haslanger's category of *gender as class*, we need to countenance another category of *gender as identity*. The category *gender*, on her view, is comprised of these two subcategories. This proposal does not exclude any trans women from the category *woman*, since all trans women will belong to this category on account of having a female gender identity. As Barnes understands this dispute, Haslanger and Jenkins disagree over "what gender is," despite agreeing on what it is that grounds the existence of genders, namely "a complex network of interpersonal social hierarchies" (Barnes 2014: 344). Thus, the dispute cannot be adequately recast in terms of grounding.

One possible line of response for the grounding theorist is to insist that Haslanger and Jenkins do disagree about what grounds what. In particular, the grounding theorist may maintain, pace Barnes, that Haslanger and Jenkins disagree over the relevant *grounds*: on Jenkins's view but not on Haslanger's, the existence of genders is partly grounded in certain facts about the inner experiences of individuals as they navigate the social world (cf. Barnes 2014: 344 n. 10; Schaffer 2017: 2460–2461; Griffith 2018: 400). Alternatively, the grounding theorist might maintain that Haslanger and Jenkins agree about certain grounds but disagree about what these grounds give rise to (Griffith 2018: 400). That is, they disagree about what gets *grounded* by the grounds in question: on Haslanger's view, it is the existence of *gender as class*, whereas on Jenkins's view, it is the existence of both *gender as class* and *gender as identity*.

But even if one or both of these replies can successfully deal with the case at hand, it is unclear whether replies of this sort will work in the case of other debates in social ontology that center on questions of the form 'What is *x*?'. For instance, consider the debate over what a social group is. Here are two possible views:

Set A social group is the set of its members.
Agg A social group is the aggregate of its members.

Set and Agg are plausibly taken to agree on what grounds the existence of a social group—namely, the existence of its members. Moreover, they are plausibly taken to agree on what these grounds give rise to—namely, the existence of the group. Nevertheless, they disagree about what a social group *is*. It is open to the grounding theorist to insist that Set and Agg disagree over some *other* grounding claims concerning social groups. For instance, they may be taken to disagree about what grounds the fact that the existence of a social group is grounded in the existence of its members. That being said, such a ground-theoretic reconstrual of the debate does not seem to perspicuously represent what's at issue.

There is, however, another line of response available to the grounding theorist. Namely, to concede that *some* debates in social ontology and feminist metaphysics are not about what

grounds what. What follows from this is that grounding may not be the only metaphysical tool that we need when studying the social world. We may also need other tools—for instance, essence, real definition, or metaphysical laws—to adequately represent certain positions and debates (cf. Passinsky forthcoming: §3). This conclusion, though, does not warrant a general skepticism about the usefulness of grounding for social metaphysics. It only warrants a modesty concerning the limits and reach of the grounding framework.[17]

Related Topics

Schnieder, B. "Dependence" [Chapter 7]
Glazier, M. "Ground and Explanation" [Chapter 8]
Litland, J. "Meta-Ground" [Chapter 9]
Skiles, A. "Necessity" [Chapter 10]
Koslicki, K. "Skeptical Doubts" [Chapter 11]
deRosset, L. "Anti-Skeptical Rejoinders" [Chapter 12]
Richardson, K. "Varieties" [Chapter 13]
Zylstra, J. "Essence" [Chapter 22]
Kovacs, D. "Modality" [Chapter 24]
Saenz, N. "Ontology" [Chapter 25]
Wilsch, T. "Laws of Metaphysics" [Chapter 30]

Notes

1 See, for instance, Haslanger (2000, 2003) and Ásta (2013, 2018: chs. 1–4).
2 See, for instance, Haslanger (2012) and Spencer (2015).
3 See Hacking (1999: ch. 4).
4 See Haslanger (1995), Hacking (1999: ch. 1), Boghossian (2001), Mallon (2007), and Ásta (2013, 2018: ch. 2) for some analyses of social construction that do not appeal to the notion of metaphysical ground.
5 On the distinction between causal and constitutive social construction, see Haslanger (1995: §2, 2003: 316–318).
6 See Haslanger (2003: 317).
7 For instance, Griffith suggests that the tools of the grounding framework are useful for articulating gender anti-essentialism and the context-sensitivity of gender and race (2018: §3).
8 I believe that this restatement of Haslanger's proposal is reasonably faithful to the original. See, in particular, Haslanger (1995: 120 n. 12).
9 See Griffith (2018: 404–406) for another argument that the ground-theoretic analysis and Haslanger's definitional analysis are not genuine competitors.
10 I do not claim that Epstein himself would recast the debate in exactly this way. In particular, my formulation of frame principles differs somewhat from Epstein's own formulation (cf. 2015: 77–80). Moreover, Epstein might wish to formulate S-Anchor in terms of collective acceptance of a frame principle rather than collective acceptance of a constitutive rule (cf. 2015: 75–77, 82–83).
11 The proponent of anchoring could maintain that anchoring also obtains in nonsocial domains. But such an application of anchoring to other domains has not yet been attempted.
12 Though see Skiles (2015) for some putative counterexamples to grounding necessitation.
13 See Epstein (2015: ch. 9) for additional arguments against the partial ground view (which he calls 'conjunctivism'). See Hawley (2019), Mikkola (2019), and Schaffer (2019) for replies to Epstein's arguments.
14 Alternatively, the partial ground theorist could take 'anchors' to be structuring grounds and 'grounds' to be triggering grounds, on analogy with structuring and triggering causes (Schaffer 2019: 752).
15 For a nice discussion of the history of this debate, see Epstein (2015: chs. 1–2).

16 Epstein also proposes that the notion of anchoring may be used to articulate a new version of individualism concerning the anchors of frame principles associated with social facts. See Epstein (2014, 2015: ch. 8).

17 Many thanks to Mike Raven, Jonathan Schaffer, and the participants of the Hamburg Workshop on Metaphysical Grounding for helpful comments and discussion.

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