

Introduction to Social Ontology

Overview

You and your friends are an amazing group. To celebrate how amazing you are, the group meets for a party. Of course, the evening wouldn't be complete without pizza. You pay the delivery boy and give him a generous tip.

But because you all study philosophy, you end up in a heated discussion. What is it for friends to form a group? What are the conditions for having a party together, rather than each of you partying by themselves in the same room? And what are these things: party, pizza, tip? The longer you and your friends talk, the more problems become apparent.

To have these questions settled on another occasion, so that all of you can enjoy the party, you and your friends decide to attend this course. Good choice!

Our course looks at social ontology, it considers the basic structure of the social world. We address the nature of groups, such as the group of you and your friends. We discuss what binds us together when we engage in a shared action such as having a party together. Perhaps some groups are agents in their own right, such as the group of friends ordering a pizza?

The course material draws on a variety of areas, including metaphysics, political philosophy, feminist philosophy, philosophy of science, philosophy of action, and philosophy of mind. In addition, the topics discussed serve as a steppingstone for engagement with the social sciences. Be it sociology or economics, the social sciences rely on an ontology of the social.

Course Structure and Assessment

The course is designed to run eleven weeks in total with two lectures per week. Additional seminars start in week three and accompany the lectures. For each seminar, three questions are provided for students to consider in preparation for the meeting.

Students are free to choose between two modes of assessment: A short essay (3000-4000 words) plus a two-hour exam, or a more extensive essay (5000-6000 words).

Course Aims

By the end of the course, students will have acquired:

- An overview of the varied topics that are commonly associated with social ontology.
- A clear map of how social ontology relates to other fields in philosophy.
- Skills for working across disciplinary boundaries.
- An introduction to key concepts applicable in other philosophical debates, such as supervenience, grounding, and natural kinds.
- Awareness of how philosophical discussions can help us to understand our own experiences such as doing something together or belonging to a gender.
- The capacity to start a conversation about social ontology with strangers at parties.

Week One – Introduction to Social Ontology

Lecture 1

After dealing with the practicalities of the course, we jump right into social ontology. What characterises the objects investigated by social ontology? There are standard examples, such as money and groups, but what unifies them?

Lecture 2

One of the classical positions in social ontology is individualism, which comes in a variety of versions, each claiming that individual agents play a central role for the social. Lars Udehn has provided an especially helpful overview of these debates ranging from classical economic to Popperian individualism and current approaches in sociology. Our discussion will focus especially on pulling different epistemological, methodological and ontological claims apart. It is one thing to say that only by studying individuals can one acquire full explanations of the social (methodological and epistemological individualism), and quite another thing to claim that the ontological basis of the social is exclusively individual (ontological individualism). Do we find any of these claims plausible?

Mandatory Reading

Udehn, L. (2002). The Changing Face of Methodological Individualism. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 479–507.

Suggested Reading

Elster, J. (1982). Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism. *Theory and Society*, 11(4), 453–482.

Elster, J. (1983). Reply to Comments. *Theory and Society*, 12(1), 111–120.

Heath, J. (2015). Methodological Individualism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015). Retrieved from:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/methodological-individualism/>

Schmitt, F. F. (Ed.). (2003). *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Udehn, L. (2001). *Methodological Individualism: Background, History, and Meaning*. London; New York: Routledge.

Watkins, J. W. N. (1952). The Principle of Methodological Individualism. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 3(10), 186–189.

Watkins, J. W. N. (1955). Methodological Individualism: A Reply. *Philosophy of Science*, 22(1), 58–62.

Zahle, J. (2016). Methodological Holism in the Social Sciences. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/holism-social/>

Week Two – Ontological Individualism

Lecture 3

We look at the more recent debate on ontological individualism. While Udehn was concerned with individualism in the social sciences, Keith Sawyer's starting point is the debate about the reducibility of mental states in the philosophy of mind. This gives us the opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the basic arguments in this debate. Especially the argument that mental states can be realised by different brain states and are therefore not reducible to them is important for our purposes. Can this *multiple realizability* argument be applied to the social?

Lecture 4

Despite offering the multiple realizability argument, Sawyer asserts a form of individuals according to which social properties can change only if the properties of the individual level change. He postulates a supervenience relationship between the individual and the social. We look at what distinguishes this kind of individualism and how plausible it is.

Mandatory Reading

Sawyer, R. K. (2002). Nonreductive Individualism: Part I—Supervenience and Wild Disjunction. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32(4), 537–559.

Suggested Reading

Bickle, J. (2016). Multiple Realizability. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/multiple-realizability/>

Fodor, J. A. (1974). Special Sciences (Or: The Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis). *Synthese*, 28(2), 97–115.

Kincaid, H. (2015). Open Empirical and Methodological Issues in the Individualism-Holism Debate. *Philosophy of Science*, 82(5), 1127–1138.

List, C., & Spiekermann, K. (2013). Methodological Individualism and Holism in Political Science: A Reconciliation. *American Political Science Review*, 107(4), 629–643

Pettit, P. (1993). *The Common Mind*. Oxford University Press.

Polger, T. W., & Shapiro, L. A. (2016). *The Multiple Realization Book*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sawyer, R. K. (2003). Nonreductive Individualism Part II—Social Causation. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 33(2), 203–224.

Week Three – From Individuals to Joint Actions

Lecture 5

Margaret Gilbert's seminal paper "Walking Together" offers a glimpse into her encompassing social ontology. At the heart of her proposal lies the notion of a joint commitment. According to Gilbert, joint commitments characterise all properly social phenomena, for example joint actions such as walking together or discussing a philosophical issue together. If we discuss a philosophical issue together, I should not just walk away mid-sentence without a reason. I have an obligation to participate in our joint action as soon as we jointly commit.

Lecture 6

According to Gilbert joint commitment are irreducible to personal commitments. They are primitive and genuinely social. Thus, Gilbert rejects some form of individualism, but which form? And what do we make of the irreducible element being normative?

Seminar Questions

- In what sense are joint commitments irreducibly social?
- Would we have the kind of obligations which Gilbert talks about if we were to rob a bank together?
- Does a joint action require common knowledge? (Does it require that I know that you intend to participate, and that you know that I know that you intend, and that you know that I intend to, ... and so on?)

Mandatory Reading

Gilbert, M. (1990). Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 15(1), 1–14.

Suggested Reading

Butterfill, S. A. (2017). Review: Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World, written by M. Gilbert. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 14(4), 475–478.

Gilbert, M. (1992). *On Social Facts*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Gilbert, M. (2013). *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA.

Schweikard, D. P., & Schmid, H. B. (2013). Collective Intentionality. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/collective-intentionality/>

Week Four – Joint Actions

Lecture 7

Having discussed Gilbert's work on joint actions, we compare it with John Searle's contribution. Searle pushes aside the normative commitment that characterised Gilbert's analysis. Instead he looks more closely at the role of mental states: To act together is to act on certain we-intentions. What characterises such we-intentions?

Lecture 8

Michael Bratman frames his account of joint actions as an individualist alternative to the proposals by Gilbert and Searle. While these two authors introduce irreducible elements to analyse joint actions, joint commitments and we-intentions, Bratman argues that we can understand joint action in terms of purely individual mental states like beliefs and intentions. Does he succeed to our satisfaction?

Seminar Questions

- In what sense are Searle's we-intentions irreducibly social?
- According to Searle, a single individual can have a we-intention. Is that plausible?
- Are Bratman's intentions-that-we irreducibly social?

Mandatory Reading

Searle, John R. (1990). "Collective Intentions and Actions." In *Intentions in Communication*, edited by Philip R. Cohen, Martha E. Pollack, and Jerry Morgan. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990. 401–415.

Bratman, M. E. (1993). Shared Intention. *Ethics*, 104(1), 97–113.

Suggested Reading

Bratman, M. E. (2014). *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Ludwig, K. (2016). *From Individual to Plural Agency: Collective Action I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sara, R. C., Frank, H., & Gerhard, P. (2014). *From Individual to Collective Intentionality: New Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press USA.

Tollefsen, D. (2005). Let's Pretend! Children and Joint Action. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 35(1), 75–97.

Tomasello, M., & Carpenter, M. (2007). Shared Intentionality. *Developmental Science*, 10(1), 121–125.

Tsochatzidēs, S. L. (Ed.). (2007). *Intentional Acts and Institutional Facts: Essays on John Searle's Social Ontology*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Velleman, J. D. (1997). How to Share an Intention. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57(1), 29–50.

Week Five – From Joint Actions to Group Agency

Lecture 9

In week five we make the transition from joint action to group agency. We start with the question whether all groups which act together are agents in their own right. To find an answer we will look more deeply at the concept of a group agent. Philip Pettit (in co-operation with Christian List and others) provided the perhaps currently most influential account of group agency. Looking at his work we end up with the following proposal: While in a joint action the mental profiles of individuals relate in a particular way, for group agency the group needs to have a mental profile of its own.

Lecture 10

We look at further details of List and Pettit's contribution. They discuss at great length the aggregation of judgements of individual group members. The beliefs and intentions of group agents follow from patterns of aggregating the beliefs and intentions of group members. They argue that only certain ways of aggregating judgements allow for groups. We discuss the motivation for these restrictions and consider whether candidates for group agency meet them.

Seminar Questions

- What standards of rationality do List and Pettit demand?
- Think of an actual candidate for group agency. Are judgements aggregated within it and if so how?
- What is the relation between having a mind and being an agent?

Mandatory Reading

Pettit, P., & Schweikard, D. (2006). Joint Actions and Group Agents. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 36(1), 18–39.

Tollefsen, D. (2015). *Groups as Agents*. Malden, MA: Polity. Chapter 3.

Suggested Reading

French, P. A. (1979). The Corporation as a Moral Person. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16(3), 207–215.

List, C., & Pettit, P. (2011). *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ludwig, K. (2015). Is Distributed Cognition Group Level Cognition? *Journal of Social Ontology*, 1(2), 189–224.

Pettit, P. (2014). Group Agents Are Not Expressive, Pragmatic or Theoretical Fictions. *Erkenntnis*, 79(S9), 1641-1662.

Rovane, C. (2014). Group Agency and Individualism. *Erkenntnis*, 79(S9), 1663–1684.

Week Six – More about Group Agency

Lecture 11

Deborah Tollefsen has written a helpful introduction to *Groups as Agents*. Drawing on her contribution, we consider the functionalist theory of mind underlying much of the current literature on group agency. A group is taken to be an agent if and only if it has internal states with certain functional profiles. To give an example, the university is only an agent, if some states within in it have the functional profile of beliefs and intentions.

Lecture 12

We go deeper into the philosophy of mind and discuss how we might apply its insights to groups. We discuss the restrictions following from functionalism and consider Tollefsen's proposal that beliefs and intentions are general dispositions of groups rather than internal states. This theory allows to attribute group agency more easily, but is it convincing?

Seminar Questions

- Why is a functionalist account of mental states amenable for theories of group agency?
- What is the intentional stance?
- Why does Tollefsen endorse intentional stance theory (=interpretivism) rather than standard functionalism?

Mandatory Reading

Tollefsen, D. (2015). *Groups as Agents*. Malden, MA: Polity. Chapters 4 & 5.

Suggested Reading

Dennett, D. C. (1987). *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. MIT Press.

Dennett, D. C. (1991). Real Patterns. *Journal of Philosophy*, 88(1), 27–51.

Huebner, B. (2014). *Macrocognition: A Theory of Distributed Minds and Collective Intentionality*. Oxford University Press USA.

Rupert, R. D. (2005). Minding One's Cognitive Systems: When Does a Group of Minds Constitute a Single Cognitive Unit? *Episteme*, 1(3), 177–188.

Rupert, R. D. (2011). Empirical Arguments for Group Minds: A Critical Appraisal. *Philosophy Compass*, 6(9), 630–639.

Week Seven – Group Ontology I

Lecture 13

The group agency debate concerns whether groups can be agents over and above their members. But what are groups anyway? We have a look at Gabriele Uzquiano's paper on groups, which denies that they can be reduced to sets or mereological fusions. One of Uzquiano's arguments relies on the fact that sets are individuated by their members, that is they cannot change their members. This doesn't seem true for groups. If a student (unwisely!) dropped this course, the class still is the same class. Or not?

Lecture 14

In this lecture, we consider Uzquiano's own proposal to take groups as primitive entities that cannot be further analysed. This gives us the opportunity to discuss what it is for an entity to be primitive and whether we think such proposals are plausible within social ontology. Groups seem to be in some sense made out of their group members, so in what sense can a group be primitive?

Seminar Questions

- Why would one want to reduce groups to something else in the first place?
- Can an account of group ontology still be informative if groups are primitive?
- Does the notion of group we are using here fit with our discussion of groups in the previous weeks?

Mandatory Reading

Uzquiano, G. (2004). The Supreme Court and the Supreme Court Justices: A Metaphysical Puzzle. *Noûs*, 38(1), 135–153.

Suggested Reading

Effingham, N. (2010). The metaphysics of groups. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 149(2), 251–267.

Ruben, D.-H. (1985). *The Metaphysics of the Social World*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sheehy, P. (2006a). *The Reality of Social Groups*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Sheehy, P. (2006b). Sharing Space: The Synchronic Identity of Social Groups. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 36(2), 131–148.

van Inwagen, P. (1998). Meta-Ontology. *Erkenntnis*, 48(2), 233–250.

Week Eight – Group Ontology II

Lecture 15

The group ontology debate has moved towards developing typologies of groups. We discuss Katherine Ritchie's proposal to distinguish between two types of groups: feature-groups and organised groups. The group of men is a feature group united by the feature of being a man. The philosophy department is an organised group characterised by a structure. One might worry that these types are not as distinct as Ritchie suggests.

We also consider how Ritchie's proposal relates to that of Uzquiano discussed in the previous week.

Lecture 16

Amie Thomasson proposes that we should focus less on the reduction of groups to something else, and consider more why we have an interest in groups. According to her, groups give a normative structure to our lives. We discuss various examples of groups that provide such a structure and potential counter-examples. Being a member of this class gives some normative structure to your life, but what about the group of people with red shoes?

Seminar Questions

- Do all groups fit into Ritchie's typology?
- What purpose should the debate on group ontology serve?
- Can you think of a group that does not provide a normative structure to our lives?

Mandatory Reading

Ritchie, K. (2015). The Metaphysics of Social Groups. *Philosophy Compass*, 10(5), 310–321.

Thomasson, A. L. (2016). The Ontology of Social Groups. *Synthese*, 1–17.

Suggested Reading

Epstein, B. (2017). What Are Social Groups? *Synthese*.

Greenwood, J. (2003). Social Facts, Social Groups and Social Explanation. *Noûs*, 37(1), 93–112.

Ritchie, K. (2013). What Are Groups? *Philosophical Studies*, 166(2), 257–272.

Thomasson, A. L. (2015). *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Week Nine – Social Kinds

Lecture 17

For our discussion of social kinds, we read a chapter from John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality*. Although Searle doesn't use the phrase "social kinds", his theory of institutional objects, such as money, accounts for social kinds. The we-intentionality we encountered in week two returns, but this time rules are accepted in the we-mode. For example, we accept in the we-mode the rule that certain pieces of paper count as money. Does that help explain what makes social kinds special?

Lecture 18

Partially drawing on Searle's work Muhammad Khalidi proposes a distinction between three kinds of social kinds. As a criterion for this three-fold distinction serves how the social kinds relate to propositional attitudes. Some social kinds don't depend on the propositional attitudes individuals have towards them. According to Khalidi racism is an example of this. The second type of social kinds at least partially depend on propositional attitudes, but not all instances of the kind have to depend on our attitudes. Khalidi's example is money. For the third type of social kind, all instances depend on our propositional attitudes, for example the kind 'prime minister'. No one is a prime minister without individuals having appropriate attitudes regarding the particular case.

Seminar Questions

- How do Khalidi's and Searle's theory relate?
- What kind of social kind is this philosophy course?
- How do social and natural kinds relate?

Mandatory Reading

Searle, J. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press. Chapter 1.

Khalidi, M. A. (2015). Three Kinds of Social Kinds. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 90(1), 96–112.

Suggested Reading

Haslanger, S., & Saul, J. (2006). Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 80, 89–143.

Haslanger, S. (2005). What Are We Talking about? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds. *Hypatia*, 20(4), 10–26.

Khalidi, M. A. (2013). *Natural Categories and Human Kinds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khalidi, M. A. (2015). Natural Kinds as Nodes in Causal Networks. *Synthese*.

Thomasson, A. L. (2003). Realism and Human Kinds. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 67(3), 580–609.

Zack, N. (1993). *Race and Mixed Race*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Week Ten – Feminist Social Ontology

Lecture 19

Our discussion of social kinds prepares us well for delving into feminist social ontology. As Khalidi suggests, parts of the metaphysical structure of the social appear up to us in a way that doesn't hold true generally. We can change the ontology of our social world! Or at least, that's how it seems. Sally Haslanger's work on social construction provides us with tools for thinking about how the social depends on us. We discuss Haslanger's typology of kinds of construction.

Lecture 20

How does Haslanger's feminist approach compare to Gilbert's, Searle's, and Khalidi's approaches? Haslanger's work raises the question to which extent normative considerations should inform social ontology and what political impact social ontology can have. Does engaging in social ontology change the social and therefore put a special normative burden on us?

Seminar Questions

- Why would feminist philosophers be especially interested in social ontology?
- How can normative commitments, such as Haslanger's, inform social ontology?
- Do Khalidi and Haslanger work on the same research questions?

Mandatory Reading

NOTE: The following text contains a discussion of rape. Although it is listed as mandatory reading, there will be *no repercussions* for skipping it. All that is needed for the exam will be treated in the lectures in this week. (Don't presume this in general!)

Haslanger, S. (1995). Ontology and Social Construction. *Philosophical Topics*, 23(2), 95–125.

Suggested Reading

Beauvoir, S. de (1972). *The Second Sex*. (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Butler, J. (2007). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be? *Noûs*, 34(1), 31–55.

Haslanger, S. (2012). *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Haslanger, S. & Sveinsdóttir, Á. K. (2016). Feminist Metaphysics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/feminism-metaphysics/>

Mikkola, M. (2016). Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/feminism-gender/>

Sveinsdóttir, Á. K., 2013, "The Social Construction of Human Kinds," *Hypatia*, 28(4), 716–732.

Week Eleven – A New Conception of Social Ontology

Lecture 21

Brian Epstein has recently challenged the basic assumptions of the social ontology literature. In his work, the distinction between an anchoring and a grounding inquiry take a central role. For example, that a certain piece of paper counts as money is grounded in it having been printed by the appropriate central bank. The anchoring facts, by contrast, what the conditions for some fact grounding another are, that is anchoring explains why central banks matter for paper being money. But does that rather abstract distinction help with social ontology?

Lecture 22

Epstein has established himself as a major critic of the individualism with which we started this course. We wrap up the course by considering his contribution to the debate. On his picture anchoring and grounding individualism turn out to be two quite different positions. In the end Epstein dismisses both, but is he right to do so?

Seminar Questions

- Is the anchoring/grounding distinction particular to the social or is it a general distinction?
- What is grounding anyway? How does it compare to causation?
- Epstein endorses a rather unusual ontology for groups. Name a few distinctive features.

Mandatory Reading

Epstein, B. (2015). *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Chapter 6 and 7.

Suggested Reading

Epstein, B. (2016a). A Framework for Social Ontology. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 46(2), 147–167.

Epstein, B. (2016b). Précis of The Ant Trap. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 2(1).

Epstein, B. (2016c). Replies to Guala and Gallotti. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 2(1).

Gallotti, M. (2016). Collective Attitudes and the Anthropocentric View. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 2(1).

Guala, F. (2016). Epstein on Anchors and Grounds. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 2(1).

Essay Questions

Students are encouraged to choose their own essay questions, but they must be discussed and approved beforehand. The following questions serve as guidance:

1. Argue *against* applying the argument from multiple realizability to social phenomena.
2. Argue for or against the distinction between joint action and group agency drawing on the philosophy of mind.
3. List and Pettit impose strict rationality criteria for groups agency. Do we need them? Argue for or against the claim. Arguments from the philosophy of mind can help.
4. Feminist social ontology is often (although not exclusively) focussed on analysing sex, gender, and race. Apply feminist contributions to another area of social ontology.
5. Do Ritchie's two types of groups cover all groups? Discuss with reference to a potential counter-example.
6. How would Epstein criticise Khalidi's proposal? How could Khalidi respond? Pick a side and argue for it.
7. Present your favourite example of an irreducible social entity and argue why it cannot be reduced. Be clear about what you mean by "reduction".

It has been my experience that students who discuss their essay plans with me *at length* receive better grades. Despite this being anecdotal evidence and the causal connection being unclear, I strongly advise you to make use of my office hours!