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Does the social exist

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I question whether social phenomena exist. Since social groups are perhaps the most widely recognised category of social phenomena, I focus my discussion on social groups. First I elucidate our common-sense intuitions about social groups. Thereafter, I distinguish between two problems: specifying the relation among the members of a social group (the individual-individual problem), and specifying the relation between social groups and their members (the social-individual problem). I argue that the individual-individual and social-individual problems comprise the core concerns of social ontology, at least insofar as social ontology is applied to social groups.

I then examine a number of possible solutions to the individual-individual problem, and argue that none of these positions convincingly captures our common-sense intuitions about social groups. I divide these solutions into Objectivist and Subjectivist accounts. Objectivist accounts of social groups exclude reference to the reflexive mental states of the individuals underlying the group, and focus instead on the patterns of interactions among group members, observable from a non-member's perspective. I argue that Objectivist accounts, including Elster's transactional account, the organic account, and the teleological account of social groups, are unable to capture adequately the distinction between a mere aggregate and a social group because they exclude reference to reflexive mental states, rendering the accounts vulnerable to a number of counterexamples. By contrast, Subjectivist positions, including Sartre's account, Gilbert's plural subject theory, and Searle's constructionism, hold that reflexive mental states provide the principle that unifies a collection of individuals into a social group. Subjectivists, however, are unable to account for the importance of the history of social phenomena.

Thereafter I consider affirmative solutions to the social-individual problem, or positions that hold that social groups exist. These positions are divided into non-reductive and reductive accounts. Non-reductive accounts, including Social Dualism and Non-Reductive Individualism, hold that social groups are logically or conceptually distinct from the individuals that comprise them. Social Dualists posit that social groups and their members are distinct entities, while Non-Reductive Individualists hold that social properties are distinct from individualistic properties. I argue that Social Dualism problematically reifies the social, while Non-Reductive Individualism is unable to

maintain the dependence of the social on the individual without collapsing into a reductive account. Reductionists hold that social groups are identical with their members, or with the intra-relations among their members. Logical Individualists hold that this identity is conceptual: the concept of a social group is the concept of a collection of individuals. Type Individualists claims that types of social groups are identical with types of members (or types of member intra-relations). And Social Functionalists hold that social groups are just phenomena with a certain function, and those functional phenomena are in turn instantiated by individuals. I argue that none of the reductive accounts are successful, however: Logical Individualism cannot account for the holism of the social, Type Individualism faces the problem of multiple realisation, and Social Functionalists cannot adequately individuate groups diachronically.

Finally, I tentatively support an alternative, negative solution to the individual-individual and social-individual problems: Eliminative Individualism. Eliminative Individualism is the position that social phenomena do not exist, that Folk Sociology is a radically false and misleading theory, and that social terms have no referent. I discuss a number of strategies for eliminating social phenomena, ultimately providing a psychological and neurological explanation that I argue might be used to explain away the appearance of social groups. That is, I make a case for the possibility that we can explain away beliefs in social groups the way we explain away paranormal, or errant religious beliefs. Finally, I argue that "thick" social phenomena, such as the wisdom of the crowds and the unintended consequences of intended action, may be explained using reason-based, statistical and possibly network-based explanations.

I conclude that Eliminative Individualism, although it faces certain challenges, is worthy of serious attention as a contender to affirmative social ontologies in the literature.