Searching for Social Properties

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Abstract. What does it take for a property to be a *social* property? This question is different from questions about what it takes for a property to be *socially constructed*. That is: it is one thing to be social, it is another to be socially constructed. Compared to questions about social construction, this question about sociality has received relatively little attention in social metaphysics. Here, I work from a very specific set of observations which arise from the social metaphysics literature to uncover a sufficient condition on sociality for properties, a condition which I argue all non-social properties fail to satisfy.

§1   Introduction

Plausibly, not everything social is socially constructed. I begin here by assuming that this is true: it is one thing to be social; it is another to be socially constructed. And this assumption is supported by existing literature in social metaphysics. For example, consider two prominent definitions of social construction relations:

Constitutive Construction   Something is constitutively constructed just in case in defining it we must make reference to *social factors*.

Causal Construction   Something is causally constructed just in case *social factors* play a causal role in bringing it into existence or, to some substantial extent, in its being the way it is.[1]

What makes the "social factors" referenced in these definitions social? Note that the answer had better not be that they are socially constructed, because then our question shows up again for a further set of social factors. And indeed, this question will remain unanswered until we have something to say about what makes these factors distinctively social that doesn't involve social construction. In other words, here, it needs to be the case that being *social* is one thing, and being *socially constructed* is another.

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[1] Haslanger (2012), p. 87, emphasis mine.

So, what is it to be social? Despite its centrality to the social construction literature, the distinction between what is social and what is not rarely receives an argument. There are a number of possible reasons for this: for one thing, in many cases the distinction between what's social and what's not is intuitive enough for most of us that it needn't be elaborated upon. For another thing, pausing to argue for this distinction would take many projects too far afield from the task at hand, with marginal returns. These are pragmatic concerns, but there are theoretical worries, too.

In particular, social ontologists have previously expressed serious doubts about the prospects of drawing the social/non-social distinction in a principled way. For example, Brian Epstein states that he is "not confident" that distinguishing clearly between social and non-social facts can be done (Epstein 2015, p. 102). Katherine Ritchie writes that "giving a noncircular definition of what it takes for something to be social is difficult, if not impossible" (Ritchie 2020, p. 404). And Sally Haslanger concurs, insofar as she thinks "it is unlikely that there is a non-circular definition [of social]" (Haslanger 2016a, fn. 8).

My project in this paper pushes back against general pessimism about drawing the social/non-social distinction in a principled way. Put somewhat differently: even if Epstein, Ritchie, and Haslanger are right to be skeptical about the project of *fully defining* sociality, it may still be worth it to try to get some starting conditions on the table. Here, I propose a sufficient condition on sociality specifically for properties. I remain neutral on what sorts of things properties are (e.g., tropes, universals, sets), and paradigmatic examples of the sorts of properties I'm talking about include: *being a woman, being cool, being charismatic*. Importantly, I am not proposing an analysis of how any of these particular properties are socially constructed (if they are), nor am I offering

anything like a view about what it takes to be a woman, or cool, or charismatic. Instead, on the

assumption that these properties are social, my aim is to explore what that sociality involves.[2]

This journey has a very specific starting point. Here, I work from the observation that predicates

like e.g., 'cool' express socially constructed properties. In other words, the meaning of 'cool' is

a socially constructed property (Haslanger 2012). I move from there to consider two questions:

first, what makes it true that 'cool' expresses the property it does? And second, what makes it

true that a given individual has the property 'cool' expresses? As I will argue in the next section,

in the social metaphysics literature, these two questions are often answered in the same way. I

think this is interesting and potentially significant. Significant enough, perhaps, to lend us some

insight into the nature of sociality more generally by revealing a sufficient condition on sociality

for properties, a condition which all non-social properties fail to satisfy.

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[2] Now you might be thinking: only a sufficient condition? This seems a bit modest. And you would be right: it is certainly more modest than a full set of necessary and sufficient conditions on sociality. And this is for several reasons. The first is that I am sympathetic to the worries about fully defining sociality listed above. But there are other issues here, too, which might be briefly described as follows—

The word 'social' is used to describe many, many different things, and sometimes we use 'social' in ways which directly conflict. For example, often times when feminists describe gender as a social phenomenon, they mean that it is *not at all* biological. On the other hand, biologists will often describe certain animal behaviors as social in a way which is also *consistent* with those behaviors being, roughly speaking, biological. In other words, feminists are often interested in talking about sociality in a way which contrasts against biology, while biologists are not. Differences in their projects, and the contexts in which those projects are conducted, produce differing, and importantly, *inconsistent* notions of sociality.

If you think that this linguistic data can clue us into important features of the underlying metaphysics here (as I do), then you might worry that any full analysis of sociality which sets out to respect these facts would be internally inconsistent. I'm personally very interested in meta-discussions about how these tensions might be settled, but a discussion like that is beyond the scope of the present paper. So instead, I set out to do something more modest: propose a sufficient condition on sociality for properties, one which biologists and feminists (and hopefully everybody else) can get behind.

It is also my belief that this proposal turns out to be more significant, and so less modest, than it might appear on a first pass. See §6.1 for more on the scope of this proposal.

§2 Starting Observations

Alice Walker is one of my favorite authors. But of course, like all of us, Walker is many things beyond her writing: she is woman and she is a womanist; she is a scholar and she is the daughter of sharecroppers; she is a sister and she is an activist. These are all ways that Alice Walker is—they are properties of Walker. And all of them are arguably social properties. But what makes them so? Let's work with just the first of these for now: Alice Walker is a woman.[3]

According to several prominent views of gender, when we say that Walker is a woman, we're saying that Walker has a certain property (a gender property, if you will), and because she has that property, 'woman' applies to Walker (Haslanger 2012, Ásta 2018, Jenkins 2016).[4] A little bit more precisely: the predicate 'woman' expresses a certain property; Walker has that property, and that's what makes her a woman.

Of course, it is natural to say that the property 'woman' expresses is just the property of being a woman. I am happy with that view in general, but sometimes using 'woman' to talk about both a predicate and a property can cause confusion. So for the purposes of our discussion here, let's call the property 'woman' expresses, 'W'. Now we have two facts on the table:

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[3] The rest of this section is about properties and predicates, and sadly, not about Alice Walker in particular. That would likely have made for a much more interesting essay. If you're looking to go beyond *The Color Purple* however, I would highly recommend *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, which is an anthology of (auto)biographical narratives, historical reflections, and Walker's personal and critical insights into Blackness and Black womanhood in the US.

[4] This is a mainstream view in the philosophy of gender, but not everyone thinks this is how things should go. See for example Barnes (2020) for critical discussion of this approach.

A. Walker is W

    B. 'woman' expresses W

Many people think properties like W are socially constructed. There are lots of views about how social construction works, and although they each say something different, there is rough consensus in the idea that people have socially constructed properties because of things that we do. For example, the fact that Walker is W is true because of things we do—the ways in which we think, talk, communicate, and coordinate with each other give rise to the social world, and with it, socially constructed properties.

In this paper, I'll use brackets like this [·] to indicate facts. So from here on, facts like the fact that Walker is W will look like this: [Walker is W]. Now here's an important question: how does human social activity make a fact like [Walker is W] true? In reply, social constructionists will point to a number of things, but crucially among them are *patterns of language use*. That is, social constructionists will say that facts like [Walker is W] are true in part because of how we communicate with each other using natural language. In other words, the language we use to describe the social world plays a role in constructing the very world we are trying to describe (Ásta 2015, 2018; Hacking 1999; Mallon 2007; Haslanger 2012; Epstein 2015).[5] On this view, [Walker is W] is made true by things that we do. And crucially, patterns of language use are among the things that make [Walker is W] true.

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[5] Language plays different roles in different analyses social construction. For example, on some causal analyses of social construction, patterns of language use *cause* certain social phenomena to obtain, and so certain social facts to be true (Hacking 1999). Alternatively, on constitutive analyses of social construction, patterns of language use constitute, ground, or otherwise form part of the metaphysical foundation for what gets socially constructed (Ásta 2018; Haslanger 2012). But in each case, language plays a role, and that is what I'm highlighting here.

What about our second fact, ['woman' expresses *W*]? What makes that fact true? Many people working in the philosophy of gender and the literature on social construction are semantic externalists, in the sense that they think, roughly, that the fact ['woman' expresses *W*] is explained by other facts about how we are related to the external world (Haslanger 2000, 2012; Mason 2020; Bettcher 2013; Dembroff 2018; Jenkins 2016).[6] Here, semantic externalism is treated as a *metasemantic* view about how words (like 'woman') come to mean things (like *W*). What exactly about the world makes ['woman' expresses *W*] true? Here, people working in the literatures just mentioned will point to a number of things, but again, crucially among them are *patterns of language use*. That is, many semantic externalists in these literatures will say that facts like ['woman' expresses *W*] are true in part because of how we communicate with each other using natural language (Haslanger 2012; Mallon 2017; Spencer 2019).

Interestingly, there is some overlap in the explanations for the two facts we have been considering. That is, [Walker is *W*] and ['woman' expresses *W*] are explained by some of the same things. To see this, notice that we have just painted a very general picture according to which the following two things are true:

      C. Walker is *W* in part because of how we use natural language.

      D. 'woman' expresses *W* in part because of how we use natural language.

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[6] I say "roughly" because not everyone on this list thinks that *W* is a property. This paper is, generally, a paper about the relationship between language and metaphysics. I prefer to talk about the metaphysics side of things here in terms of *properties*, mainly because it simplifies things. Properties are not hugely complicated metaphysical entities. But some people think that words like 'woman' pick out structures, dispositions, or processes. Those views will work just fine with what I say here. So, if you don't think 'woman' is a predicate which expresses a property, you don't have to get off the wagon just yet, but you will have to do a bit of work to translate what I say in this paper into your preferred framework.

This fact about a property [Walker is W] and this fact about language ['woman' expresses W] are made true by some of the same things.[7]

Is this relationship, between [Walker is W] and ['woman' expresses W], somehow unique? In this paper I will explore one particular way of answering "yes" to this question. On the view proposed, this relationship between 'woman' and properties like W is unique insofar as it is one that never obtains between putatively non-social properties, and the words that we use to talk about those properties (e.g., words like 'electron' and 'proton'). And if that's right, it suggests that the relationship highlighted here (between words like 'woman' and properties like W) might be a mark of *sociality*. In other words, perhaps this relationship obtains between [Walker is W] and ['woman' expresses W] but *not* between e.g., [electron$_1$ is E] and ['electron' expresses E] because W is a *social* property (and E is not).[8]

In the next section, I will work through a more specific example in order to work out the relationship sketched above in more detail. I then suggest that the presence of this relationship is a point of difference between some putatively social properties and all putatively non-social properties (§4).

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[7] Note that I am not claiming that *all there is* to social construction is language use, or that language use and social construction are somehow the same thing. I am pointing out that many people think processes of social construction *involve* patterns of language use, and many of those same people think that the process by which certain words get their meanings *involves* patterns of language use. It is that overlap that I am highlighting here.

[8] Throughout this paper I will use the property of *being an electron* as an example of a paradigmatic non-social property. Readers who think differently about electrons are invited to replace this example with their favorite actual (or even merely possible!) non-social property.

§3   A Cool Case Study

To further illustrate the relationship sketched in §2, in this section I will work through an extended example involving the predicate 'cool'. In §3.1 I will discuss various views according to which 'cool' comes to express a property (a property which we'll call '*C*'). In §3.2 I will discuss one way of characterizing what it is to be *C*. Then in §3.3 I will bring these discussions together to highlight an interesting relationship that holds between facts about 'cool' and *C*.

3.1   Predicates & Properties

Consider the predicate 'cool' and suppose that it expresses a property, *C*. I've decided to work with 'cool' for this example because, in the literatures with which this paper is concerned, it's relatively uncontroversial that 'cool' expresses a socially constructed property (*C*). And it is for at least this reason that *C* has become a stock example in social metaphysics. For instance, Sally Haslanger (2012) argues that *C* is a *constitutively constructed* property: people and things are *C* because we see them in a certain way, and so treat them in a certain way (and not because they have some special intrinsic quality that we are somehow latching onto with our usage of 'cool') (Haslanger 2012, p. 89).

What makes it true that 'cool' expresses *C*? I said previously that many people think that facts like ['cool' expresses *C*] are true at least partly because of how we use natural language. For reasons that will become apparent later, I'm going to put this claim in terms of *grounding*. As I will use it here, grounding is a relation of metaphysical explanation which obtains between facts (Fine 2012; Rosen 2010). When one fact, *x*, grounds another fact, *y*, the following things are true: necessarily, if *x* is true then *y* is true*; x* is more metaphysically fundamental than *y*; *y* is true because *x* is true (but not vice versa); if *x* were not true than *y* would not be true (but not vice

versa). The distinction between full ground and partial ground also matters here. Roughly, x fully grounds y if x alone is sufficient explain y, and x partially grounds y if x together with some other things is sufficient to explain y.

Here the relevant claim is this: ['cool' expresses C] is partly grounded in at least one fact about how we use natural language. Call that fact about how we use natural language, 'F'. When I say that ['cool' expresses C] is *partly* grounded in F, I mean that F is just one element of a *full ground* for ['cool' expresses C]; things besides F ground ['cool' expresses C]. For now, consider a full ground for ['cool' expresses C] which includes F and call that full ground '$\mathcal{G}$'. $\mathcal{G}$ and F will be central to the project of highlighting the connection between C and 'cool' in coming sections. But, in order to see this, we'll first need to say a bit more about what C is like.

3.2   What is it to be C?

C is a property expressed by our predicate 'cool', and C is also a constitutively constructed property. But, what does that latter claim really mean? Sally Haslanger (2012) first characterized constitutive social construction as follows:

Constitutive Construction   Something is constitutively constructed just in case in

defining it we must make reference to social factors.

(Haslanger 2012, p. 87)

There is some disagreement over how Haslanger's original definition is best interpreted, but I favor a reading according to which a property is constitutively constructed just in case its *real*

definition makes reference to social factors.[9] That is, a property is constitutively constructed just in case social factors are "in" the real definition of that property. Roughly, the real definition of a property is a statement of the essence of that property.[10] Here I prefer to work with Kit Fine's (1994a) notion of *constitutive essence*: according to Fine, the essence of an entity x is a set of propositions which together define what it is to be x.

Plausibly, for any given property, facts about what it takes to have that property are in its real definition. So for example, say that in order to have the property of *being charismatic*, you have to be funny. For simplicity, let's say that an individual S is charismatic iff S is funny. In this case, [S is charismatic iff S is funny] is "in" the essence (real definition) of the property *being charismatic*. Put somewhat differently, [S is charismatic iff S is funny] is a member of the set of propositions which together define what it is to be charismatic. Note that if *being funny* is a social factor, then in this example the property of *being charismatic* has at least one social factor in its real definition, and so this is an example in which *being charismatic* is a constitutively constructed property.

Moving back to the primary example in this section: C is the property expressed by our predicate 'cool'. On the assumption that C has a real definition, are there social factors in the real definition of C? Remember that in order to have C, you have to be treated in certain ways by others (Haslanger 2012). In other words, an individual S is C iff S is treated in certain ways by other people. Those patterns of behavior (those "certain ways" in which C-individuals are

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[9] Haslanger is more explicit about this position in her more recent work. See Haslanger (2014a). See Ásta (2015, 2018) for alternative readings of constitutive social construction.
[10] *Real* definitions are different from *nominal* definitions. In a nutshell, nominal definitions are generally taken to specify the meaning of a term, while real definitions are generally taken to specify the essence of the thing to which that term refers (Rosen 2015).

treated) are social factors "in" the real definition of *C*. In other words, [*S* is *C* iff *S* is treated in certain ways by others] is a member of the set of propositions which together define what it is to be *C*. And since *being treated in certain ways by others* is a social factor, it's true that *C* is a constitutively constructed property.[11] The next (and last) step in this extended example will be to show that there is another fact in the real definition of *C*, too: a fact about language.[12]

3.3   Summing Up

Recall that $\mathcal{G}$ is a set that includes the things which (metaphysically) explain why 'cool' expresses *C*. And furthermore, $\mathcal{G}$ includes a fact about how people interact with each other, a fact we've called *F*. What I want to bring out here is that *F* is likely in the real definition of *C*. In other words, facts about how we interact with one another (i.e., facts like *F*) contribute to making it true that a given individual has property *C*.

I've said that, if there is anything in the real definition of a property, it is facts about what it takes to have that property. So if facts about how we interact with one another (i.e., facts like *F*) contribute to making it true that a given individual has property *C*, then facts like *F* are in the real definition of *C*. And given that facts like *F* are in the real definition of *C*, they are among the grounds for facts about individuals with those properties-- facts like [Walker is *C*]. If this is

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[11] Note here that I am not claiming that these patterns of behavior are the *only* things in the real definition of *C*.

[12] Note that language might play a causally constructing role in addition to a constitutively constructing role here. For example, Teresa Marquez (2017) has recently argued that we would do well to work with both causal construction and constitutive construction. In her view, causal construction is needed to explain the existence of certain socially constructed entities, even if other relations of social construction are more helpful when it comes to analyzing the nature of those entities (Marquez 2017, p. 15-20). Her general point is that causal construction helps us see some relationships in the social world and constitutive construction helps us see others.

correct, then note what follows: *some of the same things that ground facts like* ['cool' expresses *C*] *also ground facts like* [Walker is *C*].[13] Put somewhat differently: in this case *F* is a partial ground for ['cool' expresses *C*], and *F* is also a partial ground for [Walker is *C*]. In the next section, I'll argue for the significance of this observation.

§4   A Mark of the Social

In the last section I used an extended example involving the predicate 'cool' and a property it expresses (*C*) to illustrate the observation central to this paper. A new question guides the present section, where we are no longer concerned with what this relationship is like, but why it holds in the first place. In short, my proposal here is that this relationship holds in part because properties like *C* are *social* properties. That is, the relationship just explored between predicates like 'cool' and the properties they express may give us a bit of insight into the nature of sociality more generally.

Why think that? Well intuitively, the relationship just highlighted between 'cool' and *C* does not hold between putatively *non*-social properties and the predicates we use to talk about them. For example, consider our predicate 'electron' and suppose it expresses a property, *E*. In addition, let's consider a particular electron which we will hereby name 'electron$_1$'. In order for the relationship outlined in the previous section (§3) to hold here, the following two things have to be true:

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[13] Note that the claim here is not that the elements of $\mathcal{G}$ are the *only* things in the real definition of *C*, just that *some* of the elements of $\mathcal{G}$ are *among* the things in the real definition of *C*.

E. [electron₁ is E] is partially grounded in patterns of language use.

F. ['electron' expresses E] is partially grounded in patterns of language use.

Plausibly, (F) is true and (E) is false. This is because, while the ways in which we communicate with each other plausibly play some role in making facts like ['electron' expresses E] true, facts like [electron₁ is E] have nothing to do with how we use natural language. That is, whether a given entity has property E is wholly independent of how human beings use natural language. And in general, I think we would be hard-pressed to find examples of putatively non-social properties for which it is the case that patterns of language use partially determine which things have those properties.[14] This is primarily because the real definitions of non-social properties (like the property of *being an electron*) don't contain information about how we represent them: they are, by nature, independent of us.

If there is indeed an asymmetry between the case of 'cool' and C, and the case of 'electron' and E, then that is worth exploring. Why might this asymmetry hold? Here I suggest that it is because the relationship just explored between 'cool' and C is a mark of the social. In what follows, I try to make this idea a bit more precise.

To begin, consider the following proposal:

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[14] Again, this example will not work for you if you think that *being an electron* is a putatively social property. The general idea here is to pick any putatively *non*-social property; the observation laid out in §3 won't apply to that property. *Being an electron* is just my example of a putatively non-social property, but, so long as it is expressed by a predicate, any actual or merely possible non-social property will work here.

SOCIAL (preliminary)

> For any property $\mathcal{P}$, representation $\mathcal{R}$, and fact about language $\mathcal{F}$, if
>
> $\mathcal{F}$ is in the real definition of $\mathcal{P}$, then $\mathcal{P}$ is a social property.

SOCIAL is a sufficient condition on sociality for properties. What makes a property a social property? *SOCIAL* offers an answer. I'm using 'representation' here in a very broad sense: beliefs and concepts are representations in this sense, as well as lower-level mental states such as emotions and desires.[15] Linguistic items are also representations in this sense, and this includes *predicates* like 'woman' and 'cool', predicates commonly discussed in social ontology.

I have been working with examples that highlight this relationship as it obtains between predicates and properties, primarily because the literature on social ontology has devoted most of its attention to these sorts of cases. The example with 'woman' sketched earlier was one such case. There, it turned out that the questions "Why does Alice Walker have property W?" and "Why does 'woman' express W?" had overlapping answers. And the same thing happened in the next section, when it turned out that the questions "Why does Walker have property C?" and "Why does 'cool' express C?" had overlapping answers. That overlap, I suggest, is *a* mark of the social.

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[15] While I'm referring to these mental states as representations, I want to remain neutral here on the nature of the content of these representations (e.g., whether it is propositionally structured or not), or whether it makes sense to talk about representational content at all.

So that is the proposal. But is it any good? In evaluating this condition, we can ask: are there

properties which satisfy *SOCIAL*, but which are putatively *not* social properties? If not, then

SOCIAL is in good standing; if so, then the proposal is in trouble.

This version of the proposal is labeled "preliminary" because I think there are properties which

are counterexamples to this version of *SOCIAL*. These are properties, each of which (a) has a

fact about language in its real definition, but (b) is putatively *not* a social property. For example,

consider grammatical properties of formal languages, like the property of *being a truth-functional*

connective. (On the assumption that this property has a real definition) its real definition includes

at least one fact about language. For example, that fact might be the following: [the truth value

of a sentence which is formed using a truth-functional connective is entirely determined by the

truth values of the sentences that go into it].

Is the property of *being a truth-functional connective* a social property because it has this fact about

language in its essence? Intuitively, no; *being a truth-functional connective* is not a social property.

Generally speaking, this is because grammatical properties of formal languages are plausibly not

the sorts of conventional properties which count as social (Sider 2011; Quine 1935, 1963).

Conventional properties of languages are sometimes understood as social properties because

whether something (a meaning, a word, a sentence, a language) has one of these properties

depends largely on contingent decisions that we, human beings, make:

> To illustrate, consider the word 'inch'. The purpose of 'inch' is to be a
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> convenient measure for smallish things, the kinds of things we can hold in our
>
> hands. But there is a range of very similar lengths that would each have served

this purpose. We chose one of these to mean by 'inch', but that choice was arbitrary; any of the others would have served our purposes equally well. This choice was one of *candidate-selection convention*. (Sider 2011, p. 54; emphasis mine)

Sider's notion of candidate-selection convention is an example of a conventional property of language. But note that grammatical properties of formal languages are not at all like this. For example, consider the property *being the conjunction connective*: here, it is not the case that there is a range of very-similar- but-importantly-different things, each of which might perform the exact same connective role.[16] More generally put: when it comes to formal languages, conventions don't play a role in determining what the truth-functional connectives are or how they function. And given this, we have good reason to think that properties like *being a truth-functional connective* are not conventional, and so, not social. However, the preliminary version of SOCIAL fails to give this result, and as such, it will need to be revised (below).

Before moving on, notice that in the context of this discussion, we've shifted from using language to demarcate the social domain, to using this modal notion, *contingency*, to do roughly the same job. Now, it's true that when we talk about sociality, we are often concerned with contingent features of the world. The social domain is characteristically contingent (Epstein 2021; Hacking 1999; Haslanger 2012). Importantly, this is not to say that there are *no* necessary relationships in the social domain—my commitment to this is obvious, I think, from the fact that much of the foregoing discussion was framed in terms of grounding and real definitions.

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[16] Now, there is an arbitrary range of *symbols* which might be used to *pick out* the conjunction connective ('∧', '&', etc.), but that is an importantly different choice. Notice that in Sider's example, the arbitrary choice is between equally good candidate *meanings* each of which perform the same role, not between equally good candidate names for one meaning.

And so, the question is one of how and where exactly to locate the contingency of the social world.

In this paper, I've proposed that we locate some the contingency of sociality in language, and more specifically, in the relationship between language and non-linguistic reality. But as this discussion highlights, there are some ways in which this strategy is incomplete: for example, sometimes we want to talk about how language *itself* is social, and it probably won't work to point to more parts of language for that. So, unless we're trading in brute facts, there must be more to say about what makes language social, and so, about what is contingent about sociality more generally. However, that this is true should be unsurprising, I think, given that we're presently in the business of evaluating a sufficient condition on sociality—a condition which, I expect, is one among many.

Of course, all of this is consistent with maintaining that contingency is a hallmark of sociality (it's just a hallmark about which there is much left to say). As such, when we're looking for additional resources in trying to figure out whether some property is *putatively* a social property, it makes sense to ask what, if anything, is contingent about that property. And in this case, there seems to be nothing contingent whatsoever about properties like *being a truth-functional connective*. In fact, it's quite the opposite: facts about, and features of, formal languages are stock examples of *necessary* parts of reality. So again, while this doesn't automatically disqualify something from being a social full-stop, it should give us pause. And here, this an additional, related reason to

think properties like *being a truth-functional connective* are not social properties. And again, the preliminary version of *SOCIAL* gives the wrong result here.[17]

Now consider the revised proposal:

> *SOCIAL* (final)
>
> > For any property $\mathcal{P}$, representation $\mathcal{R}$, and fact about language $\mathcal{F}$, if
> >
> > > (i) $\mathcal{F}$ is in the real definition of $\mathcal{P}$, and
> > >
> > > (ii) $\mathcal{F}$ is a partial ground for [$\mathcal{R}$ represents $\mathcal{P}$]
> >
> > then $\mathcal{P}$ is a social property.

This final version of *SOCIAL* gives the right result in the case considered above: the property of *being a truth-functional connective* is not a social property. To see why, let's be a bit more careful here and say the phrase 'truth functional connective' expresses a property, A.[18] This property is had by all truth-functional connectives (e.g., &, ∨, →). Now we can ask: is there a fact about language which is (i) in the real definition of A, and which also (ii) explains why 'truth-functional connective' expresses A? Put somewhat differently: is there a partial ground for ['truth-functional connective' expresses A] which is *also* a partial ground for a fact like [& is A]?

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[17] For readers who are not on board with this, it is still an option to maintain that properties like *being a truth functional connective* really are social, after all. In that case, this preliminary version of *SOCIAL* will be enough, and you might decide to skip this next bit with the revised proposal. All of the discussion in the final section of this paper will still apply to this preliminary version of the proposal.

[18] 'A' is just what we've been calling the property of *being a truth functional connective*.

In reply: begin here with the previous observation that if there are facts about language in the real definition of *A*, then they are plausibly facts like the following: [the truth value of a sentence which is formed using a truth-functional connective is entirely determined by the truth values of the sentences that go into it]. But facts like this don't explain why we talk about *A* in the ways we do in natural language. In other words, while a fact like this does partially explain [& is *A*] (i.e., that & is a truth-functional connective), it does *not* explain why our English phrase 'truth-functional connective' expresses *A*. As such, if this is correct, then the final version of *SOCIAL* gives the right result in this case.

§6 Objections

In this final section I'll consider three objections to the final version of *SOCIAL*.

6.1 Too Much or Not Enough

How helpful is this proposal, really? It's reasonable to worry here that *SOCIAL* is either too limited in scope or aims to do too much. I will address each of these issues in turn.

The first issue is that *SOCIAL* may be too limited in scope. Does this condition really tell us all that much about sociality? To begin to answer this concern, note that *SOCIAL* is designed to capture any social property that we talk about in any language. For example, think about words in English like 'bachelor' (*being a bachelor*), 'beautiful' (*being beautiful*) 'baker' (*being a baker*) and all the other words in English that pick out putatively social properties. This condition applies to all of those properties. Now think about all the social properties that people talk about in languages other than English; this condition applies to all of those properties as well. In addition, this condition will also capture any social property that we merely *represent*, even if we don't have

a specific word for it in natural language. Given this, my own sense is that *SOCIAL* applies to thousands of properties.[19] I don't have a sense for how this compares to the number of putatively social properties this proposal fails to capture, but given how many properties are included here, it's reasonable think that *SOCIAL* captures a significant percentage of social properties.

Importantly, a property can be social according to this proposal even in those contexts in which people don't *think* they are talking about (or even representing) something social. Feminists and other social philosophers past and present have maintained that some entities can be social even when they aren't typically recognized as such (Ásta 2018; de Beauvoir 1949; Haslanger 2003, 2012; Manne 2017). Gender presents one classic example of this: many philosophers of gender have argued that gender is and has always been socially constructed, even in contexts where many people think words like 'woman' and 'man' refer to something biological and non-social. And what's more, many maintain that gender can be socially constructed *by language* in these same contexts. How is that possible? Generally speaking, what matters here is what the words *actually* mean (which, if you are a semantic externalist, may differ from what people *think* certain words mean). And, meanings aside, it also matters how our ways of communicating with each other function to shape the social environments we inhabit. On these views then, a property like *being a woman* can be socially constructed by language even when everybody thinks the word 'woman' refers solely to human biology.

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[19] Exactly how many properties this proposal applies to will depend in part on how one individuates properties. But my sense is that even on a coarse-grained view of how properties are individuated, this is still a significant percentage of properties.

And this is good news for *SOCIAL*. It means that this condition applies to (a) some properties we talk about using language and think are social; (b) some properties we talk about using language and *mistakenly* think are not social (but, as feminists and others have shown us, these properties really are social); and (c) some properties we don't talk about, but do represent in some other way. And my own sense is that this gets at a lot of properties.

But perhaps it gets at too many. The second issue here is that *SOCIAL* may be too reductive. Sociality is an expansive, complicated, multifaceted phenomenon—surely not something that can be boiled down to relationships between facts about language and real definitions. As such, one might worry that, with *SOCIAL*, I'm trying to shove sociality into a tiny analytic box, and too much is lost in this process.

I'm sympathetic to the spirit of this concern because I agree: sociality is a weird and wonderful and complicated thing, and I don't pretend to have captured half of it here. *SOCIAL* is a sufficient condition on sociality for properties. But of course, many other things besides properties are social, some properties may be social for reasons that have nothing to do with *SOCIAL*, and we haven't touched anything like a necessary condition yet. These are all interesting areas for further research, but for the reasons given above, I think it's alright that we haven't done all of that in this paper. *SOCIAL* tells us something new about a significant percentage of properties and it is a condition that no putatively non-social property can satisfy.

6.2   Nameless Properties

For any given human language, there are potentially many social properties that go unnamed by that language. These are social properties which exist, but we just don't have words

for them in our present lexicons. For example, the term 'intersectionality' was only introduced in the late-20th century.[20] This term refers to a particular social phenomenon[21], but surely that phenomenon was social *prior* to the introduction of the term 'intersectionality'. And examples like this abound: simply think of any term which has recently come to refer to a social entity; plausibly that entity was social before we used that term to talk about it.

In reply, begin here by noting that *SOCIAL* does not imply that, if a property is not named, then it is not social. This is because *SOCIAL* is not a full analysis of sociality, but merely a sufficient condition on sociality for properties, and importantly, properties which are actually represented somehow (be that by a predicate, a belief, an emotion, or something else). There may be social properties which *SOCIAL* does not count as such. And there may be other social entities which fall completely outside the scope of *SOCIAL*. But these are not counterexamples to the view. A counterexample would take the form of a putatively *non*-social property which satisfies both (i) and (ii) in *SOCIAL*. Unrepresented properties are not counterexamples to *SOCIAL* specifically *because* they are unrepresented — *SOCIAL* is only a condition on properties which are represented.

Furthermore, it may be that even though some social properties are not named by lexical items, they are still *represented*, and crucially, our representations of them play a role in determining the

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[20] Crenshaw (1989; 1991)

[21] Which exact phenomenon/phenomena 'intersectionality' refers to is still a matter of discussion. I don't have the space to discuss different views about intersectionality here, but I would refer interested readers to the original Crenshaw papers (1989; 1991), the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), and Patricia Hill Collins' recent work, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019).

conditions under which they are instantiated. If and when that happens, the properties in question would count as social, according to *SOCIAL*.

6.3   Changing Names

There is another worry in this vicinity, one which turns on the idea that we could have used different predicates to express the properties that we do talk about. Here is how this objection goes: I've said that a partial ground for ['cool' expresses *C*] is in the real definition of *C*, and presumably, that partial ground will include information about the word 'cool'. If that's right, then information about the word 'cool' is in the real definition of *C*. But intuitively, it seems that we could have used a word other than 'cool' to express *C*, in which case information about that other word would be in the real definition of *C*. But then, to change the real definition of *C* is to change *what it is to be C*, and so strictly speaking, we wouldn't be using that other word to express *C*, but rather to express a different property which is similar to *C*. And that is counterintuitive. It seems like we could have used different words to talk about *the same properties*, not slightly-different-but-still-very-similar properties.

In reply, begin here by recalling that *SOCIAL* is based on an observation, one which in §3 was articulated as follows: there is overlap in the ground for ['cool' expresses *C*], and the ground for [Walker is *C*]. In particular, at least one fact serves as a partial ground for both ['cool' expresses *C*] and [Walker is *C*]. In §3 I called this fact '*F*', so let's do that again here. The objection above operates on the assumption that *F* *must* include information about the word 'cool', but it's unclear why we need to accept this. To see why, consider that *F* might be a generic fact about whatever word English speakers use to express *C*, or really any fact about language use which plays the grounding role required but doesn't include information about the predicate 'cool' in

particular. All I've said about *F* is that it is a fact about language, and it serves as a partial ground for both ['cool' expresses *C*] and [Walker is *C*]. But that description doesn't require *F* to contain information about the word 'cool' in particular, and given this, the problem articulated above doesn't arise.[22]

§7   Conclusion

In first half of this essay, I highlighted an interesting relationship between predicates like 'cool' and 'woman', and the properties they express. Then I suggested that this relationship might be unique, in that it is a relationship which never obtains between putatively non-social properties and the terms we use to talk about non-social properties. Why would this relationship hold between predicates like 'woman' and the properties they express, but not between predicates like 'electron' and the properties they express? Perhaps because this relationship is a mark of the social.

In the second half of this essay I attempted to spell out what that might mean in a bit more detail with *SOCIAL*. *SOCIAL* is a sufficient condition on sociality for properties. This proposal has issues (§6), and so it may turn out that other ways of capturing the relationship highlighted here are more promising. But even in that case, my earlier arguments hold: there is something unique about the relationship between some social properties and the words we use to talk about them, something that isn't present in the non-social case. And that, I think, is worth exploring.

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[22] Thanks to an anonymous referee for their assistance with this response.

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