SOCIAL PROPERTIES

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Abstract. Some properties, like the property of *being money*, seem obviously social. Others, like the property of *being negatively charged*, seem not to be. But what makes for the difference here, between which properties are social and which aren't? This chapter provides an overview of four general ways that this question has been answered in the existing literature on social properties.

1   Introduction

Consider the property of *being a US one dollar bill*. What does it take for a particular piece of paper to have that property? The answer here will likely have something to do with being printed by the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing, but of course (and perhaps more centrally) it will have something to do with being treated by people in certain ways, as when the paper is traded in exchange for goods and services. And of course, in order for exchanges like that to happen, the relevant parties have to represent the piece of paper in certain ways—in particular, they have to think about it, communicate about it, and understand it as currency. And this sort of representation is facilitated by the fact that these kinds of exchanges almost always happen within particular environments, structured by economic institutions, markets, and ideologies, as well as facts about how similar pieces of paper have been (and are currently being) treated in similar contexts. Other things will likely matter here too, but this is just to sketch out a rough explanation for why a particular piece of paper might have the property of *being a US one dollar bill*. [1]

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[1] Hereafter '*being a dollar bill*.'

Notice that here, we're not asking why a particular piece of paper is *called* a dollar bill, or is correctly categorized under the label 'dollar bill'. That is a question about language. We are asking a metaphysical question about a property, and what might explain why a certain thing has that property. As such, we're looking for a particular type of explanation, namely, a *metaphysical* explanation. In the paragraph above, I listed several things which might metaphysically explain why a particular piece of paper has the property of *being a dollar bill*, and interestingly, all of these things seem to be *social*. In other words, this is a situation in which the fact that a particular piece of paper has the property *being a dollar bill* is metaphysically explained by social things. This is the basic recipe for social properties.

Very generally, we can say that a property, F, is social when, for any *x*, F*x* is metaphysically explained by social things. There are, of course, many different ways to fill in the details of this general recipe, and some of those ways will be discussed in this chapter. First though, it's important to note that in the metaphysics literature on social properties, the question of what it takes for a property to be social is often treated as a question about the *social construction* of properties, and so most of the discussion about social properties happens in the language of social construction. I will do the same in this chapter. And this social construction debate is, very generally, a debate about the nature of the explanatory connection between *x*'s being a dollar bill and things like the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing.[2]

In the pages below, I will focus on the question of what it takes for a property to be social, how that question has been asked, and how it has been answered in social metaphysics. I will begin in Sections II and III with a survey of some of the general theoretical constraints at play in the literature on social properties, and a brief discussion of the property/kind distinction. Then in

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[2] Importantly, we should distinguish this general question of what it takes for any property to be social from more specific questions about e.g., which particular things actually explain why *x* has the property of *being a dollar bill*. Debates over whether and why particular properties like this are social tend to be debates over (i) what actually explains why people/things have the property in question, and (ii) whether those really are social *explicantia*. I won't engage those sorts of debates here.

Sections IV-VII I will present what I take to be the four main views currently on offer in this literature. These are: the view that social properties are causally constructed, the view that social properties are constitutively constructed, the view that social properties are constructed via grounding relations, and the view that social properties have social essences.

II   Social characteristics

The literature on social properties operates with several theoretical constraints. To start, note that the social domain is characteristically contingent (Epstein 2015, 2021; Hacking 1999; Haslanger 2012). For example, it is contingently true that a particular piece of paper is a dollar bill, and it's also contingent whether anything at all is a dollar bill. The social domain is also characteristically non-fundamental; on a familiar "levels" picture of metaphysical reality, the social domain sits at a higher level than, say, the domain of quantum physics (Barnes 2014; Schaffer 2009, 2017; Sider 2011, 2017). So, for example, the fact that a particular piece of paper is a dollar bill is not a fundamental fact; it is explained by more fundamental things. We also tend to think that this relationship is one of dependence: that a particular piece of paper is a dollar bill depends upon the existence of e.g., certain economic institutions and markets (Ásta 2018; Mason 2021; Searle 1995). Moreover, these things make it true that a particular piece of paper is a dollar bill—they generate that fact, in some sense (Haslanger 2012; Schaffer 2017). So in summary: socially constructed things are contingent and non-fundamental, and they are generally taken to be explained by, generated by, and dependent upon the things that construct them. These features of social construction form a minimal baseline for any view of social properties.

My aim is to present the views in this chapter in a way which is neutral with respect to what properties are (e.g., whether they are tropes, universals, sets). Notably, properties themselves aren't always treated as relata for each of the relations discussed below. For example, we don't usually say things like "*being a dollar bill* is grounded in social factors"; instead, we say things like "the fact that X is a dollar bill is grounded in social factors", or alternatively, "X's being a dollar bill is grounded in social factors". I will do my best to adjust the discussion below accordingly.

Before moving on to the views about what it takes for a property to be social, I'd like to briefly address the idea that social properties are not biological properties. This view sometimes appears in discussions about the social construction of gender, for example, where it is argued that gender is social as opposed to biological. This suggests that part of the *reason* gender is social is that it is not biological, and so perhaps not being biological is a necessary condition on being social. However, there are good reasons to think that properties can be both biological and social. For example, biologists will describe the behaviors of many non-human animals as social in a way which is consistent with those behaviors being, in some sense, biological as well (consider: *being an ant colony* and *being the waggle dance of a honey bee*). In addition, feminist scholars have argued that sex and sexuality are socially constructed in ways which leave these properties both social and biological (Ásta 2018: 70-92; Butler 1980; Fausto-Sterling 1993; 2003). As such, it is implausible that not being biological is a necessary condition on being social.

The view that social properties are not biological is sometimes generalized into the proposal that social properties are not *natural* properties. This proposal is more difficult to discuss because 'natural' can mean so many things (for more on natural properties, see chapter 4 of this volume). However, on most (if not all) popular interpretations, the natural/non-natural distinction does not map directly onto the social/non-social distinction, and so it is implausible that the social properties are simply the non-natural properties.

To be fair, offering a non-circular definition of sociality is notoriously difficult, and as we'll see, much of the literature on social properties presupposes a basic, intuitive notion of what it takes to be social. For much of this literature is concerned with the question of how social properties are constructed by other social factors, factors which essentially infuse the properties they construct with sociality. In other words, this literature has largely been concerned with capturing how social properties are built by other social factors (Bennett 2017). [3]

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[3] Of course, this leaves open the question of what makes those factors social in the first place, and whether there are any social properties which are constructed purely by non-social factors. Unfortunately, I lack the space to address these issues here, but Sally Haslanger's recent work on the materiality of social structures is a good place to begin to explore this topic (Haslanger 2020).

III How to be social: properties & kinds

In the next four sections I will present what I take to be the four main views currently on offer in the literature on social properties. Each of these views uses a different type of metaphysical explanation (causation, constitution, grounding, essence) and so, to the extent that there is a debate here about which view is correct, it is a debate over which type of metaphysical explanation holds between social properties and the things that construct them.

Before moving on to these views however, it will be good to observe that many things are social, not just properties. There are social institutions, facts, individuals, artifacts, relations, and representations, likely among a great many others. And there are also social *kinds*. Much of the literature on social construction is concerned with the construction of kinds (Ásta 2013, 2018; Haslanger 2012; Mallon 2016) and this literature significantly overlaps with the literature on social properties. This is because, very generally speaking, in this literature kinds are treated as collections or categories of individuals which share one or more properties in common (Ásta 2013, 2018). And when it comes to social kinds, these properties are social properties. In addition, the question of what makes a kind social is often answered in terms of an explanation for how the individuals in the kind came to have the properties which purchase their kind membership. And where those properties are social, that explanation references social things.

It is my sense that the social literatures on properties and kinds are close enough to where, in many places, there isn't a clear line between them, and most of what has been said about social properties has been said in discussions about social kinds. For example, some of the views described below treat properties as though they are kinds, and vice versa. I don't know that a rigorous treatment of this distinction exists within social ontology and so for my part I will follow the literature in switching between the two, although I will acknowledge when a particular author takes care to separate them.

IV Causal views

According to causal views, social properties have social causes. So, for example, *being a dollar bill* is social because, for all *x*, if *x* has the property of *being a US dollar bill*, then social factors are among the causes for *x*'s being a dollar bill.

Ian Hacking's (1999) view on the construction of interactive kinds is a prominent early example of a causal view. Hacking argues that certain kinds are caused to exist through the introduction of certain tools to represent certain populations (e.g., labels, taxonomies, often introduced by relative authorities on the populations being represented, like social scientists); the introduction of these representational tools then causes the relevant populations to respond and adjust to being represented in those ways, which in turn causes changes in the representations, and so on. These interactions form causal cycles, or what Hacking famously calls looping effects. The general idea is that interactive kinds are social because they come about through these causal exchanges between representations and human behavior.

Other examples of prominent causal views include Sally Haslanger's (1995, 2012) view of causal social construction, according to which "something is causally constructed iff social factors play a causal role in bringing it into existence, or to some substantial extent, in its being the way it is" (Haslanger 1995: 98).[4] Ron Mallon (2016) argues for a view according to which some social kinds are homeostatic property clusters, or clusters of properties which are regularly gathered together by an underlying causal mechanism. On Mallon's view, these mechanisms are usually social norms or conventions, and that is what makes these kinds social. Mallon's is a causal view because these underlying norms and conventions cause the existence of the social kinds in question.[5]

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[4] More recently, Riin Kõiv (2019) has defended a view of causal construction which centrally employs a *contrastive* notion of causation. On this view, "*x* is socially causally constructed iff, if [social factors*] rather than [social factors] obtained, then *x** rather than *x* would obtain" (Kõiv 2019: 86). Kõiv argues that this characterization of causal construction avoids some of the issues for common interpretations of Haslanger's original definition (see Díaz-León (2015) and Marques (2017) for additional evaluations of causal construction).

[5] On Mallon's view, kinds are clusters of properties, but kinds are also properties themselves. That is, kinds are "categories that are or could be relevant or important or significant enough to figure in our successful theories" and the relevant categories, for Mallon, are "properties or kinds instantiated by humans" (2016: 6-7). So kinds, properties, and categories strongly overlap on this

On causal views, social properties have social causes. But in addition to this, causal constructionists are also often interested in the causal *consequences* of the construct, and that a particular construct has social consequences is sometimes taken to be part of the reason why the construct itself is social, in the first place (Ásta 2015; Wendell 1990). Hacking's looping effects present one example of this: interactive kinds have social causes, but they also have social effects, e.g., changes to the ways in which the kind is represented, and subsequent changes to the members of the kind. Haslanger discusses something similar in the form of discursive social construction (Haslanger 1995, 2012) and Mallon argues that causally constructed human kinds have causal powers (Mallon 2003, 2016). Whether properties themselves can serve as causes is a matter of debate (See chapter X of this volume), but if they can, then this is yet another characteristic of social properties on the causal view: they have social effects.

V   Constitution views

According to constitution views, social properties are constituted by social factors. So for example, the property of *being a dollar bill* is a social property just in case it is constituted by social factors.

The central challenge facing constitution views is one of specifying how, exactly, this sort of constitution works. It is implausible that the sort of constitution at work here is material constitution, for example, as this is typically understood as a one-to-one relation which obtains between spatially and materially coincident things (Wasserman 2021). Many social properties and the factors which construct them do not comfortably fit into this equation however, so it will be good to have something different to say about the constitution relation in this context.

John Searle's (1995) view of constitutive rules is a prominent early example of constitutive construction. On Searle's view, a particular piece of paper, *x*, is a member of the kind *dollar bill*

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view. Given this, note that on Mallon's view, it makes sense to talk about social factors directly causing properties/kinds to exist (in addition, perhaps, to generating facts about things with the properties).

in a context C just in case *x* counts as a dollar bill in C. This is an example of what Searle calls a constitutive rule, the more general formulation of which is: *x counts as a y in C*. This "counts as" relation is to be understood as a constitution relation, which is here analyzed in terms of a status function: a particular piece of paper constitutes a dollar bill in context iff it counts as a dollar bill in that context iff it functions as a dollar bill in that context.

Social kinds, on Searle's view, are constructed in contexts where individuals collectively endorse rules with this general shape. These collective endorsements are facilitated by the existence and activities of institutions, like the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing (among many, many others). Importantly, kinds are centrally dependent upon social institutions and collective representations in a way that facts about individual kind membership are not. This is to ensure that e.g., particular pieces of paper can be dollar bills even when no one ever directly represents them as such (say, because they have been lost under someone's bed, or something like that). This means that facts like [the kind *dollar bill* exists in C] and [*x* is a dollar bill in C] are made true in different, but importantly related ways: the kind *dollar bill* exists in C because individuals in C collectively endorse rules like "green pieces of paper count as dollar bills in C", rules which lay down the conditions for membership in the kind *dollar bill*. The fact that *x* is a dollar bill in C is true, then, because *x* satisfies these membership conditions, and so functions as a dollar bill in C.

Other prominent examples of constitutive views include Haslanger's (1995, 2012) view of constitutive social construction, according to which "something is constitutively socially constructed just in case in defining it we must make reference to social factors" (Haslanger 2012: 87). I list this view here because it has been understood as a constitution view at times (Ásta 2015), but in her more recent work, Haslanger (2014) has clarified that here she has in mind *real definitions*, or essences, and so this is perhaps best characterized as an essence view of social properties (more on this in Section VII).

In more "mainstream" metaphysics literatures, it has become popular to analyze constitution in terms of grounding (Audi 2012; Bennett 2011, 2017) and this option is available

to constitution theorists working in the social metaphysics of properties, as well. I will turn to grounding views next.

VI   Grounding views

According to grounding views, things with social properties are grounded in social factors. So, for example, the property of *being a dollar bill* is social because entities with this property are grounded in social factors (or alternatively, for fact-grounding views: *facts about* entities with this property are grounded in social factors).

Grounding is typically characterized as a relation which holds between facts (Fine 2012, Rosen 2010), although there are some views according to which entities can ground, as well (Schaffer 2009, 2016). It is an explanatory relation, such that where x grounds y, x explains y. This relation is largely taken to be asymmetric, irreflexive, and transitive, and it is often taken to be one of dependence as well: y depends in some crucial sense upon x. And, for at least those reasons, in most cases x can be understood as being metaphysically prior to, or more fundamental than, y. The distinction between full ground and partial ground also matters here: roughly, x fully grounds y when x alone is sufficient to explain y, and x partially grounds y when x together with some other things is sufficient to explain y. This distinction matters because, oftentimes, social factors make up only a partial ground for (a fact about/entity with) a social property, as there may be elements of a full ground for the property which are not social.

Jonathan Schaffer (2017) has defended a grounding view of social construction, according to which "to be socially constructed is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns" (Schaffer 2017: 2454). Aaron Griffith (2018a, 2018b) has also argued for a grounding approach to social construction, according to which "for something to be socially constructed is for it to be (at least partly) grounded in social reality" (Griffith 2018a: 3). Notably, on both views, when x grounds y, x doesn't need to be absolutely fundamental (that is, x itself may be grounded in other things). This allows for grounding relations to obtain between facts and entities in the social domain, which is characteristically non-fundamental.

Brian Epstein (2015) defends a view according to which social facts are constructed via grounding relations, in addition to what he calls anchoring relations. Very generally, on Epstein's view, there is a grounding relation which holds between the fact that paper$_1$ is a dollar bill and e.g., the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and there is a grounding relation which holds between the fact that paper$_2$ is a dollar bill and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing … and so on. We can then ask: why do all of these individual grounding instances obtain? The answer is that they are all anchored by a general rule of the following form: for all x, the fact that x is printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing grounds the fact that x is a dollar bill (Epstein 2015: 77).[6] Notably, Schaffer, Griffith, and Epstein propose general grounding construction frameworks which might then be applied to social properties, but they are not concerned with the social construction of properties in particular.

There are grounding views specifically oriented toward properties, however. For example, Ásta (2015, 2018) argues that social properties are the social significance of underlying base properties. On Ásta's view, social properties are conferred onto their bearers in particular contexts by other individuals and institutions in those contexts. I list this view among grounding views here because Ásta analyzes these conferrals in terms of grounding relations. For example, let's say that, in Ásta's terms, there is a gender property, *being a woman*, which is the social significance of some further property, *being taken to be feminine*. Then if someone (Suzy, say) has this gender property in context C, it is because other people and/or institutions operative in C take Suzy to be feminine, and by taking Suzy to be feminine, those people and institutions confer unto her the property of *being a woman*. Importantly, for Ásta, that other people/institutions in C treat Suzy in this way *grounds* Suzy's being a woman in C. In other words, on Ásta's view, the fact that Suzy is a woman in C is grounded in facts about how other people/institutions in C treat Suzy (Ásta 2018: 7-33).

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[6] There is some debate over whether anchoring is a type of grounding (specifically, whether anchoring relations are best understood as grounding laws). See Epstein (2019) and Schaffer (2019) for discussion.

The last collection of views to be considered here are essence views. It's worth noting that grounding views and essence views often overlap, in part because, on some of these views, essences are analyzed in terms of grounding (Rosen 2015) and generally, grounding and essence have been described as closely related (Correia & Skiles 2019).

VII   Essence views

According to essence views, a property is social just in case it has an essence which includes social factors. So for example, the property of *being a dollar bill* is social because it has social factors in its essence.

Sally Haslanger's notion of constitutive social construction is perhaps best understood as an essence view like this (Haslanger 2012, 2014). For Haslanger, something is constitutively constructed just in case it has a real definition which includes social factors (Haslanger 2012: 87; Haslanger 2014: 29). Real definitions can be contrasted against nominal definitions: when I ask after the meaning of a term, e.g., 'dollar bill', I'm asking about the nominal definition of 'dollar bill'; on the other hand, when I ask after the real definition of the property of *being a dollar bill*, I'm asking about the essence of the thing the term 'dollar bill' picks out (in this case, the property *being a dollar bill*). Here, Haslanger is working with an analysis of real definitions developed by Gideon Rosen (2015), an analysis which incorporates a Finean notion of constitutive essence. Generally speaking, the constitutive essence of an entity x is a set of propositions which together define what it is to be x (Fine 1994). So, on Haslanger's view, for a constitutively constructed entity x to be defined by social factors is for x to have a constitutive essence, (at least some of) the propositions of which have social factors as elements.

Asya Passinsky (2021) also argues that Fine's notion of essence can be fruitfully employed to analyze social construction. Passinsky argues that essence views of social construction have certain advantages over grounding views in the context of feminist metaphysics, where many of the important questions center around the nature of e.g., gender (as opposed to being solely questions about what grounds facts about gender). Other examples of essence views include Rebecca Mason's (2021) view that social kinds are essentially mind-dependent. On Mason's view,

"a kind, K, is mind dependent $=_{df}$ it is essential to being K that if an entity, x, is K, then x is K (partially) because certain mental states exist" (Mason 2021: 3981).

I have defended an essence view of properties which employs a Finean notion of essence as well, together with partial grounding (Payton forthcoming). This view builds on the consequences of two observations: first, that a huge number of social properties are constructed, at least in part, by facts about how language is used. And second, that on several popular semantic externalist views, facts about language use play a role in explaining why particular words take particular meanings. So, in both cases, facts about language use are playing a central explanatory role, and I argue that this overlap tells us something interesting about the nature of social properties. Very generally, the view is that a special relationship holds between social properties and the devices we use to represent them (e.g., predicates, concepts). This relationship can be generally stated as follows: there are representational facts which explain both (i) why someone/something has a particular social property F, and (ii) why a particular representational device (e.g., a particular predicate) picks out F. So for example: plausibly, there is a fact about language which explains both (i) why a particular piece of paper has the property *being a dollar bill*, and (ii) why 'dollar bill' picks out *being a dollar bill*. The grounds here overlap in a unique way, and that, I argue, is a distinctive mark of sociality.

VIII   Conclusion

In this chapter I've covered four general views about social properties currently available in the social metaphysics literature. I have not, generally, taken the time to evaluate these views here, or attempted to argue for the advantages of one view over the rest. However, an evaluative project like that might begin with the theoretical constraints presented in Section II. For example, we might ask: how well does each particular view account for the relations of dependency, generation, and explanation that we observe in the social world?

In addition, I have said that the constraints sketched in Section II form a kind of minimal baseline for a view of social properties, but there are often additional desiderata at play in these debates. For example, much of the social metaphysics literature on properties overlaps with the philosophy of gender (Haslanger 2000; Barnes 2020; Jenkins 2016; Witt 2011), the philosophy of

race (Glasgow et al 2019), the philosophy of disability (Barnes 2016), and the philosophy of sexuality (Andler 2021; Dembroff 2016), and other similar social literatures. And importantly, discussions in these literatures are often informed by political and pragmatic considerations, considerations which then bear on the utility of particular views about the metaphysics of social properties in these contexts. As just one example of this, consider the general argument that, necessarily, if we were to stop engaging in certain patterns of behavior, then this would result in changes to, or else the elimination of, certain oppressive social structures (Haslanger 2012). Note that arguments like this build in a dependence claim: y depends on x in such a way that, necessarily, if not-x then not-y. Some but not all of the views surveyed in this chapter can support claims like that. This is just one example of how arguments in socially and politically engaged literatures can generate additional constraints and desiderata for views about social properties.

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