Social Ontology, Philosophically

In the spirit of both the workshop and the provocation piece that its organizers circulated in May, I have not written a proper paper, that is, one replete with introduction, development, and conclusion. Instead, following the organizers’ lead, and responding to select comments in their piece, I have produced a series of points, elucidations, and arguments. These, together, articulate my philosophical conception of social ontology.

I. What is Social Ontology?

In posing this question, I do not imply that there exists something that is incontestably social ontology, through the examination of which the answer to the question would be revealed. I also, however, decline replacing this question with an investigation of the making, disputation, and maintenance of answers to it (see § 20 of the organizers’ piece). This investigation is legitimate and important. My question, however, is simply a lead-in to explaining what I mean by “social ontology.” Different things can be named by this term, and no one rendering is the correct one. What is most relevant to judging the cogency of an explication of social ontology is whether it (1) picks out a real feature of social life or social research and (2) so links onto theoretical traditions in philosophy and the social sciences as to justify the label “social ontology.” I believe that my conception does both. I do not deny, incidentally, that answers to my question might be connected to the results of investigations into their production, contestation, and propagation. The one, for example, might be informed by the other.

By “social ontology” I mean ideas about, including the self-conscious study of, the nature, character, or basic features, structures, or elements-constituents of social life. A social ontology, accordingly, is a statement or understanding of the nature, character, or basic features, structures, or constituents of this. It is an explication or understanding of the basal “what there is” to social existence. I call on a cluster of terms—“nature,” “character,” “features,” “structures,” and “constituents”—in defining social ontology to indicate that theorists can describe different sorts of thing in specifying the “what there is” to social life. Depending on the philosophical and social theoretic traditions in which they stand, theorists might incline toward specifying the basic nature or structures or constituents or features or organization or stuff (etc.) of sociality. In all instances, however, their formulations specify the basic “what there is” of social life; these formulations articulate their understandings of what, ultimately, there is to the subject matters in which they are interested. These formulations and understandings are their ontologies. Formulated ontologies can range from a few sentences to entire chapters and longer. Well-known chapter plus treatments are chapters one and six of Durkheim’s *The Rules of Sociological Method*, chapter two and *passim* of Giddens’s *Central Problems in Social Theory*, and the first half of Barnes’s *The Elements of Social Theory*. Another fine example of a lengthy ontology, though not a social ontology, is Latour’s *Irreductions*. 
That part of a theory (or a way of thinking) that is ontological is not always well-demarcated from the parts that are not. One cannot, moreover, always point to where a theory’s ontology ends and its nonontological components begin. The notion of an ontology, of a formulation or understanding of what there basically is to social life, is not that discriminating. I aver, however, that all theories of social life either (1) explicitly contain and maybe also discuss or (2) constitutively presuppose ontological understandings.

Many social ontologies have existed through the history of thought about human sociality. Many of these have been one or another form of individualism. Prominent nonindividualist ontologies can be found in the work of Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Parsons, Althusser, Bourdieu, and Giddens.

II. Contrasts

It might help clarify my understanding of social ontology if I contrast it both to other uses of the term and to cognate terms. I recently came across a book titled *Contributions to Social Ontology* (Routledge, 2007). Being interested in the topic, I procured a copy. When the volume arrived, I quickly learned that its essays represent only one type of social ontology as I understand the notion, namely, the one espoused by so-called “critical realism.” (Critical realism arises from the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar, more basically, from the ideas of his teacher, Rom Harré; Margaret Archer is another social theorist of note here). For present purposes, the social ontology of critical realism sets forth two key propositions: (1) that social reality is composed both of objects and events to which people have experiential access and of a nonobservable stratum of mechanisms and laws and (2) that the surface experiential social world is governed by this deeper nonexperiential stratum. The book’s essays, accordingly, are about—or approach their topics through ideas about—relations between the experiential objects and events of social life and the mechanisms and laws that govern them. The book’s title thus reveals that its editors construe social ontology as critical realist social ontology. They appropriate the term “social ontology” to designate what a more ecumenical conception would describe as just one brand. Not being a proponent of critical realism, I felt misled by the title.

My understanding of social ontology must also be distinguished from two possible understandings of the term that derive from prominent philosophical conceptions of ontology. The first is a conception widespread in contemporary analytic metaphysics that harks back to Aristotle’s text, the *Categories*. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers have used the term “categories” to designate the most basic types of entities, phenomena, or properties there are. Examples from Aristotle include substance, quantity, quality, place, time, and action. Contemporary analytic metaphysicians who are interested in ontological questions address such issues as what basic sort of entity offers the best
analysis of what, ultimately, certain phenomena are (for instance, nature, causality, time, personhood). Today, there are three leading basic sorts of entity with which philosophers seek to analyze such phenomena as nature and personhood: substances, events, and processes. To advocate a substance, event, or process ontology is to claim that certain phenomena are to be analyzed, at base, as substances, events, processes, or assemblages of these and their features.

When ontology is so understood, social ontology becomes the ontology of social entities and phenomena, and those interested in the subject analyze social phenomena such as nations, groups, governments, and discourses as assemblages of substances, events, or processes. Readers who are neither analytic philosophers nor attuned to this style of thought tend to find such analyses dry and of little use in the investigation of real social phenomena. This reaction, I believe, reflects the fact that claims about which categories social phenomena should be subsumed under, reduce such phenomena to their most general and abstract common denominator, thereby rendering the claims almost useless in understanding particular social phenomena. Analytic social ontologies qualify as social ontologies as I understand the term, just not very useful ones. A fungible social ontology is one whose concepts inform theories about or descriptions and explanations of actual social phenomena. (By contrast, the usefulness of the research program in computer and informational science called “formal ontology” rests precisely on the abstractness and generality of analytic ontology, from which it grows. This research program aims to construct formal representations of entities and relations that, in encompassing many universes of entities and relations, enable diverse data sets to be integrated into a single framework.)

In an adjacent region of the contemporary philosophical landscape, Heideggarians appropriate the term “ontology” to mean being. For them, social ontology is or studies the being of social phenomena. I cannot discuss this here, but this usage closely comports to the analytic conception of ontology. For the being of social phenomena is their mode, or way, of being, and a specification of this converges with a categorization of them. In any event, the being of social phenomena can be added to the above list of sorts of things that a theorist might describe in specifying what there is to social life. Heideggarian social ontology is a version of what I mean by social ontology.

At the same time, my conception of social ontology is heavily indebted to Heidegger’s, or rather Husserl’s notion of regional ontology. As Heidegger explicates the notion, a regional ontology is a set of basic concepts with which a science comprehends the domain of objects it investigates. Examples of such purported domains are nature, history, life, and language. A regional ontology of the nature studied by physics, for instance, might conceptualize nature in terms of mass, energy, time, and space. A regional ontology of the social, accordingly, would be a set of basic concepts with which social science comprehends the
domain of society or sociality. Such an ontology is a direct ancestor of my notion of a social ontology as an account of the nature, mode of being, or basic structures, features, or constituents of social life. One important difference, to which I return, is that I do not think that social life or social phenomena form a domain or region distinct from other putative domains or regions.

A final notion of social ontology from which I wish to distinguish my conception is one that occasionally surfaces in the workshop organizers’ statement. According to this notion, an ontology is something like people’s understandings of the entities they encounter, i.e., the meanings of these entities. This notion appears in paragraph twelve, for instance, where a bottle of water is at first terror-free and then an entity of potential terror. The organizers use the word “ontology” to refer to entities being this or that, to entities meaning this or that, meanings “that can become insecure in virtue of a particular local history of passage and spatial alignment.” Consider, also, paragraph fourteen, where biotechnology “as a certain and manageable technology” and as “an unknown and risky technology” are called “ontologies.” I have already indicated how I analyze such “ontologies,” namely, as understandings-meanings of entities. I affirm, moreover, that “ontologies” of this sort are a crucial feature of social life: any useful or plausible social ontology in my sense must recognize and encompass them. One difference between ontologies as understandings-meanings and what I mean by ontologies lies in the following: whereas people and other organisms (though not things) can straightforwardly “have” ontologies construed as the understandings-meanings of entities (see §18), ontologies as I construe them are paradigmatically properties of scholarly thought and action. Whether and to what extent nonscholars possess them is a further question.

III. What about the Social in Social Ontology?

Talk of social ontology is bound to nettle those people who think that there is no such thing as “the social.” These individuals might say that the idea of social ontology is vitiated by the facts (1) that the bounds of the social—what qualifies and does not qualify as social, where society begins and ends—are imprecise, undetermined, even indeterminate and (2) that what talk of and terms for social phenomena denote is inextricably entwined with, even riddled with, nonsocial phenomena such as things of nature. People who think this might hold, instead, that scholarly investigations of phenomena that encompass humans and nonhumans, social and nonsocial phenomena, possess ontologies tout court.

This sort of charge raises far too many complicated—and sometimes conflated—issues to be adequately addressed here. I do, however, want to indicate why I retain the moniker “social ontology.”

I use the word “social” in a straightforward and intuitive way that comports with common usage—or at least one prevalent common usage—of the term.
“Social,” as I use it, means pertaining to human coexistence. By “human coexistence,” moreover, I simply and intuitively mean the hanging-together of human lives, the togetherness and withness of human beings. (Any such definition, note, has already begun to move in a circle.) “Social ontology,” accordingly, signifies the ontology of human coexistence, the ontology of the phenomena that make up that coexistence, the phenomena that constitute or make up the hanging-together of human lives. I make no apologies, moreover, for focusing on human life. I am aware, of course, that the term “social” is used to characterize members of other species. My treatment of social life as a human affair simply reflects my interest in humanity and makes no claims about either the relations of human sociality to nonhuman sorts or relations among conceptions or theories of different species’ sociality.

I do not use the term “social ontology” to indicate that ontologies are the product of, or that their “enactment” tied to, social circumstances (see §23). I do think that social ontologies are the products of social circumstances, and, depending on what “enacting” ontology means, I might affirm that enacting them is tied to such circumstances. I likewise do not use the term “social ontology” to indicate that what counts as social is itself the upshot of enactment (though this might be true.)

I also do not claim that the above definition of “social” cleanly separates social from nonsocial phenomena. It is an intuitive rendering, one that jibes with both common usage and the tradition of social thought. Nor, accordingly, do I hold that there is a well-defined realm or domain à la Husserl that can be labeled “society,” “the social,” “social objects,” or “the objects studied by the social sciences” and cleanly demarcated from other realms, for example, nature. Nor is there a distinct level of reality or organization that is social. I do not, moreover, advocate that familiar and pervasive thesis that what makes up social phenomena are humans and their relations alone. STS, like other fields of thought such as anthropology, is obviously right that the phenomena regularly called “social” encompass nonhuman phenomena such as technologies, organisms, and things: the material arrangements amid which people carry on their practices—arrangements and practices together forming the stuff of social phenomena—are composed of and impacted by artifacts, organisms, and things (the latter are not mutually exclusive categories). This means, among many other things, that the “natural” things that are part of social life are at once natural and social entities. In any event, the variegated composition of social entities does not negate the label “social.” To think otherwise is to surrender social ontological analysis to those ontologies that acknowledge human phenomena alone as constitutive of human sociality.

What I do claim is that social affairs form a topic, a subject matter, one in which many people have—indeed, society at large has—been interested for centuries. The phenomena and events that make up the hanging-together of human lives, their togetherness and withness, form a subject matter—or rather,
many subject matters—about which humans seek comprehension, over which they seek control, and from which they seek amelioration. At the latest when people think theoretically about these affairs and investigate them systematically and methodically, and in my view often also when they are not theorizing and so investigating them, their thinking and action are informed by ideas about the nature etc. of the phenomena and types of phenomena involved. It is because there is considerable past and current interest in matters that are social and because scholars’ approaches to these matters evince ontological ideas, that social ontology is, not just a useful, but an unassuming notion.

IV. Ontology and Epistemology

Paragraphs three and four of the organizers’ piece raises questions about ontics, ontology, knowledge, and epistemology. The authors wonder whether relations among these matters should be reconsidered and familiar distinctions abandoned or rethought. I cannot address the conceptions of these matters afoot in STS, but I can provide a straightforward philosophical rendering of their difference and relationship. Others will have to elucidate whether and how this rendering relates to discussions in STS.

Start with the distinction between knowledge and world. I write “distinction” and not “separation” or “difference” because I mean to begin just with the distinction—independently of any conclusions that might be drawn about matters that presuppose it, e.g., conclusions about the relationship between knowledge and world. (Even the most trenchant idealists grant the distinction—they need it to formulate their position). Ontology comprises ideas about the nature, mode of being etc. of what is, i.e., the world. Epistemology comprises ideas about (human) knowledge: about the processes, mechanisms, character, and possibilities of knowledge. So construed, ontology and epistemology presuppose one another. A position on the nature of the world presupposes some idea of how one can know anything, for instance, the nature of the world. Conversely, a position on the character, means, and possibilities of knowledge presupposes at least a notion of what there is, in whose terms the character and possibilities of knowledge are articulated.

Although ontology and epistemology presuppose one another, they are distinct. Although a scholar, moreover, cannot have one without the other, this does not mean that he or she must be equally interested in both or cannot foreground one and consign the other to the background in pursuing research. A scholar can cut into the complex of ontology and epistemology where he or she chooses, though it is advisable to remain mindful of the presuppositions of one’s starting point. It follow that, in formulating an understanding of basic features of social phenomena, one only brackets and does not extinguish questions about knowledge, about how one knows or can know what one professes.
This rendering of the difference and mutual dependence of ontology and epistemology might be irrelevant to STS as the latter is represented in paragraphs three and four of the organizers’ piece. Perhaps it more germane to remark that when an observer—say, a student of science—studies social ontologies, he or she studies human knowledge (human intellection or cognition, if you prefer): for conceptions of the nature etc. of social phenomena are part of human knowledge, in this case, part of the knowledge had by at least scholars of social life. In this context, however, scholars’ knowledge must be distinguished from their epistemologies: their ontologies are part of their knowledge but distinct from their epistemologies, which are a different part of their knowledge. A student of science can also study how the scholars whose ontologies she studies devise and defend them. If she does, the differences among the subject scholars’ ontologies, epistemologies, and knowledge processes remain. Of course, the student of science’s own investigation rests on an ontology, upholds an epistemology, and instantiates certain processes of knowledge production. These, too, can become objects of study. But all these matters must be kept analytically apart.

V. A Turn to (Social) Ontology?

A premise of this workshop is a putative or possible turn to ontology in STS. I am not qualified to evaluate this premise. I can, however, say a word about a possible turn to ontology in a domain with which I am more familiar, namely, social theory, in particular, the traditions of social thought in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and geography.

The present phases of these traditions do not evince a return to ontology. This is because these traditions have long exhibited a concern with ontology: their present attention to this represents a perpetuation of the past, not a turn to something new. Consider, for instance, sociology. Ontological concerns and moments date back at least to Marx and Comte. Indeed, ontological concerns and moments are prominent in European sociology from the 1870s up to World War II, as evidenced in the work of Tönnies, Tarde, Durkheim, Simmel, Mauss, Weber, Vierkandt, and Halbwachs. It is not incidental to the presence of ontology in their work that these scholars were philosophically-informed thinkers who aimed at broad theories. Sociology’s engagement with ontology continued after the war in such theorists as Parsons, Homans, Mills, Blumer, Garfinkel, Lefebvre, Althusser, Giddens, Luhmann, Habermas, Bourdieu, Abbott, and Barnes. Note that I am not claiming that ontological concerns and moments are paramount or dominant in their work, only that these concerns and moments are conspicuous, conscious, and formative for further aspects of their theoretical edifices.

Parallel remarks hold of anthropology, though most anthropologists have not shared some sociologists’ taste for generality and systemicity. Nevertheless, earlier theorists such as Tyler, Lowie, Malinowski, and Kroeber displayed
significant ontological concerns and moments, just as did later theorists such as Radcliffe-Brown, Levi-Strauss, Godelier, Geertz, and Harris. Admittedly, anthropology’s taste for explicit ontology has slacked (but see the work of Wendy James, among others), while that of an ascendent social science, geography, has rapidly intensified. A quite different, but fascinating story would have to be written about the discipline of economics.

Ontology is part of the theoretical superstructure of social research. What varies among disciplines, and among practitioners of particular disciplines, is the dedication, directness, and overtness with which ontological ideas and concerns are aired and addressed. Sociology, for instance, has evinced the greatest and most energetic attention to ontological matters, whereas post-World War II political science, especially in the US, is marked by both the evisceration of overt concern with and the dissemination of presumed ideas about certain basic features of its subject matter.

VI. The Role of Ontology in Social Research

A common complaint against social ontology is, What’s the point? This final section sketches the role that ontology plays in social research. This sketch is an account of “ontology in practice” (§22). The understandings, concepts, and ideas that fall under the “high minded, lofty, abstract concept” (ibid) of social ontology have specific roles to play in the investigation of social life. In my opinion, what needs deflation in this context is, not ontology, but an exaggerated preoccupation with it. Luckily, mostly only philosophers, and only a few of them, suffer from this hypertrophic attention.

Ontology, as indicated, is part of the theoretical superstructure of social research. It is important to explain that by “theory” I mean abstract, systematic, general thought. “Abstract” means that what theories claim about the world is not encountered as such in experience. “Systematic” means that theories are both methodic and holistic (where “holistic,” in turn, means that theory does not haphazardly conceptualize this and that phenomena but instead devises accounts of diverse phenomena that reveals how those phenomena hang together). Social theory, accordingly, is abstract, general thought about social things, i.e., human coexistence. Social theory divides into substantive theory and epistemology, where substantive theory encompasses thought about the character, development, and organization of human coexistence. Ontology is part of substantive social theory.

Social theory so conceived must be contrasted with what often goes under the label “theory” in the social sciences. The social sciences—above all, economics, political science, and to a lesser extent sociology—have long sought to emulate the natural sciences. Part of their attempt to do this has been to base their idea of theory on dominant (philosophical) conceptions of theory in the natural disciplines, above all, physics. During much of the long 20th-century,
as a result, these social disciplines have claimed that theory comprises systematically related laws, bundles of generalizations, or models (simplifying, manipulable representations of complex states of affairs based on laws of and fundamental ideas about the domain of phenomena involved). Of course, social science has met little, if any, success in identifying laws of social affairs. The usefulness of models, above all the computational models with which computer-savvy social scientists today simulate the development of social affairs, is more uncertain and awaits future judgment.

Scientistic theory can qualify as theory as I use the term. My present concern, however, is with social ontology and its role in social research. In this context, I should also acknowledge a prominent conception of theory in contemporary social life and investigation that equates theories simply with hypotheses or proposed explanations.

Ontology contributes to social research—including to theories as hypotheses and proposed explanations—in the ways that theories construed as abstract, systematic, general thought can do so. (Incidentally, two other types of theory that, like ontology, have long played roles in social research without being acknowledged as theories by scientistic conceptions of social research, are typologies and accounts. By an “account” I mean a general description in words of how things are or work either in a given domain or regarding a specific aspect of social life, for example, economies, kinship relations, or the constitution of identity.) Generally speaking, theory informs empirical investigation by providing frameworks for it. This has multiple aspects. To begin with, theory provides understandings of key concepts. Examples are identity, gender, stratification, social space, power, rationality, and technology. Ontology provides understandings of such concepts as structure, rule, practice, actor, power, field, culture, and network. With these concepts, investigators conceptualize their topics or subject matters and also formulate their descriptions, explanations, and interpretations. Theory thus informs explanations—and hence theories qua hypothetical explanations—by providing concepts for their formulation. Theory likewise provides concepts for models, including simulation models. This conception of the relation between theory and explanation represents one way of acknowledging both the contingency of explanations of social phenomena and the fact that explanations of social events of the same type (however narrowly defined) vary.

It is worth emphasizing the contrast between the just outlined determination and use of concepts and the once widespread and still today occasionally heard claim that concepts are useful only if operationalized. A concept is operationalized through the specification of discrete empirical marks, the occurrence of which implies that the concept applies to the empirical phenomena bearing the marks. In research informed by theory in the above sense, by contrast, elaborate theoretical discussions yield rich understandings of concepts on the basis of which researchers use concepts to conceptualize
objects and topics of study and to describe and explain social affairs. In order to acquire the required understanding, furthermore, researchers need to read theory and take theory courses.

Latour’s opus is a dramatic example of how ontology can inform social investigation. In a series of articles and books, Latour has developed an ontology that boasts concepts such as actant, network, enlistment, and hybrid. These concepts are used to analyze states of the world that encompass humans. This ontology is at once a social ontology since it ipso facto provides an understanding of the basic constitution of social phenomena (they are networks). Latour might protest the use of the adjective “social” in this context. It should be remembered, however, that his rejections of “the social” are often directed at that particular social ontology which construes social entities as relations among people. What’s more, many of the topics he addresses are social affairs, or at least largely social affairs, according to both common parlance and, inter alia, my definition of social—regardless of how many nonhumans they embrace (e.g., science and the use of keys and doors). Most important, his ontology can be used to analyze social affairs. Latour’s work offers a dramatic example of how an alternative ontology informs novel descriptions and explanations of the world.

To illustrate further the contribution of ontology to social research, consider the different research directives to which researchers of different social ontological stripes are subjected by their ontologies when they explain, say, what goes on in a classroom. An ontological individualist of the classical sort will conceptualize what is to be explained and how to do so by reference to individuals and their features. What goes on in the classroom is an amalgamation of individuals’ actions, and these actions are explained by reference to the mental states of those performing them. Patterns and regularities of action are likewise conceptualized as rising out of individual actions, intended patterns explained by reference to the intentions behind them and unintended patterns explained by reference to the mental states of different individuals and interpersonal (“group” processes). By contrast, the Durkheimian investigator will be interested in that component of what goes on in the classroom that is the manifestation of social facts (the remainder will be understood as individual peculiarities to be explained psychologically). She will proceed by first identifying which social facts, i.e., which collective ways of acting, feeling, and thinking are manifested in the classroom. She will then explain these social facts through the contributions they make to the functioning of the social whole of which they are part. Identifying the social facts involved involves examining interactions in the classroom and trying either to discern which groups are present there (groups are the carriers of social facts) or to spot coercion, a mark of social facts. The Giddensian researcher, meanwhile, treats classroom goings-on as part of a system of recurrent practices. To explain these goings-on, he or she first identifies the patterns of action of which they are part. These patterns help compose the practices that are carried out in the classroom. The investigator then seeks to infer the sets of rules and resources that are
implemented by actors carrying on the practices, the persistence of the practices involved in turn relying on the implementation of these rule-resource sets. The actor-network investigator, finally, treats what goes on in the classroom as events befalling a network of actors (human and nonhuman). He or she explains what goes on by examining relations among these actors, for instance, the actions, translations, enlistments, programs of action, and the like by virtue of which networks rise, persist, and dissolve.

Another way theory informs empirical work is by suggesting important topics and issues for investigation. Real social problems and dilemmas will always motivate studies of the social world. Theoretical developments, however, also suggest topics. Theories of modernity and modernization, for example, have suggested topics about such matters as rationalization, city and country, governmentality, group cohesion, the exploitation of workers, and forms of culture and language. Theoretical conceptions of space, to take a second example, have suggested important topics about such matters as the organization of cities, the history of capitalism, local and global, the production of identities, and relations between nature and society. Ontologies, meanwhile, often suggest important theoretical issues, that is, issues about which further abstract, including ontological thought is required. Examples of such issues are the nature of normativity, the character of social space, the relation between actor and structure, and relations between society and nature. Of course, because theory is informed by empirical knowledge, knowledge of these matters contributes to the theories involved.

A final way theory informs empirical work is by suggesting connections among research findings. The divers studies by anthropologists of “premodern” peoples might have amounted only to compendia of information were it not for theories of kinship, religion, and economic production (etc.) through which their observations and reports connected and pointed toward future research. At least since Marx, to take another example, theories of capitalism have joined empirical work on different economies in an umbrella framework. Ontologies sometimes contribute to the interconnection of research by contributing concepts on the basis or background of which umbrella or connective theories are elaborated.