

This is a translation of a review that I wrote in Swedish and which was published in *Filosofisk tidskrift* 45(1): 59-63 (see <https://www.filosofisktidskrift.se/fulltext/2024-1/index.html>). The Swedish text was translated with Google Translate and only lightly edited. (Please do not quote this translation. Thanks!)

## Review

*Nonideal Social Ontology: The Power View*

Åsa Burman

Oxford University Press, 2023. viii+253 pp. ISBN 9780197509579

Social ontology is a field of philosophical research where questions about the nature of social and institutional reality are addressed. In *Nonideal Social Ontology: The Power View*, Åsa Burman gives an overview of this field as it appears within contemporary analytic philosophy. She argues that a paradigm shift from “ideal” to “nonideal” theory in the field is underway, and that this shift ought to be completed. The distinction between these paradigms is inspired by Charles Mill's distinction between ideal and nonideal political theory, but ideal social-ontological theory is mainly theory that overlooks or obscures social oppression, while nonideal theorizing instead draws attention to and illuminates it (pp. 14 and p. 155). Burman also develops his own nonideal theory of social power.

Ideal social ontology is represented by the works of Margaret Gilbert, John Searle and Raimo Tuomela. According to the approach of these theorists, social reality is constituted by participants' shared or collective beliefs, intentions and activities – their *collective intentionality* – regarding this reality. For example, Swedish coins are money by virtue of the fact that we believe these coins are valid means of payment and that we treat them as such. This seems to imply that no social phenomena can be such that members of society are ignorant or unaware of them. The approach also makes it difficult to explain how disagreement can prevail over contested social phenomena, such as the extent to which implicit sexist or racist norms are embedded in society. Indeed, Gilbert, Searle and Tuomela do focus on social phenomena or facts about which there is great agreement (such as that the coins in my pocket are money). They also do not give much attention to how such social phenomena can be conditioned by social conflicts or unequal power relations.

Nonideal social ontology is represented in the book by accounts presented by Ásta, Johan Brännmark, Sally Haslanger and Katharine Jenkins, as well as by Burman's own account of social power. These all intend to make visible and analyse social injustices or oppression or otherwise be helpful in improving people's lives. Within the nonideal paradigm, Burman distinguishes between accounts that are purely descriptive (Ásta's, Brännmark's, and her own) and emancipatory accounts that has as their primary function to bring about political or social change (Haslanger's, Jenkins'). In nonideal social ontology, the paradigmatic examples of social phenomena have been sex, gender and race, as well as laws or norms attached to these phenomena. Brännmark's theory allows us, for example, to characterize sexism and racism as informal social institutions. He believes that sexism and racism limit and enable the behaviour of individuals in the same way as formal institutions. Individuals can be influenced by these informal institutions even if they are unaware or disagree about the extent of their influence.

Burman's critical discussions of the ideal and nonideal theories she addresses are generally nuanced and enlightening. Contrary to ideal theories in social ontology, she argues that social institutions such as money and marriage do not necessarily involve collective intentionality

(which is consistent, of course, with a claim that these institutions actually involve collective intentionality) (pp. 85–100). However, her main criticism of both ideal and nonideal theories is that they all overlooked economic class as an important social phenomenon. Which class an individual belongs to is determined by his relationship to the means of production, rather than by how he is categorized by others or himself. However, Gilbert, Searle and Tuomela claim to present general accounts of social reality and to provide philosophical foundations for social science – claims that Burman herself shares. Given that class is an important category within much research in social science, Burman believes that their accounts should therefore have something to say about class as a social phenomenon. Nonideal social ontology, on the other hand, has so far overlooked class even though class is the basis of great social injustice and oppression, that is, of what nonideal social ontology is supposed to pay attention to (pp. 2, 161 and p. 167).

One response to this criticism is that class is only a social phenomenon in an indirect sense (pp. 103, 107, 167 and pp. 170–171). Property rights are maintained by virtue of reflexive shared or collective attitudes and activities regarding property rights. Without property rights, there are no capitalists or workers and thus no (indirect) social phenomenon of class. Burman agrees but points out that the fact that class is an indirect social phenomenon does not mean that it is any less significant or paradigmatic than phenomena that are social in a direct sense.

Overall, Burman's critique of both ideal and nonideal social-ontological accounts is that they have not given important social phenomena or aspects of social reality the attention they deserve. In addition to class, important forms of social normativity and social power have been overlooked, for example. Social normativity has been described almost exclusively in deontic terms (e.g. the fact that the coins in my pocket are money gives me certain rights, the fact that I am male rather than female gives me informal entitlements in certain situations, etc). However, Burman points out that there is also a teleological social normativity. This normativity is manifest in evaluations of how well or poorly we fit ideals tied to social categories. How we are evaluated in relation to these gives rise to positive or negative power in various domains. Such power can also be based on assessments of how well a person fits a social stereotype. For example, a man may have a better chance than a woman (positive telic power, in Burman's terminology) of receiving research funding because the stereotypical image of a scientist is a man (p. 195).<sup>1</sup> The same man may have a worse chance than a woman (negative telic power) of getting help from social services if he is the victim of domestic violence, because as a man, he does not fit the stereotype of such a victim.

When gender or other group affiliation systematically affects individuals' abilities and opportunities, these individuals have what Burman calls positive or negative structural power. Structural power is not necessarily based on widespread ideals or stereotypes. It can also be based on class for example. According to Burman, the fact that the theory can take class affiliation into account in this way is an important advantage of her theory. Unfortunately, she says little about what class is, except that she is using a Marxist concept of class according to which class membership is determined by individuals' relationships to the means of production (pp. 147-148 and p. 163). However, it is unclear how individuals' relationships to the means of production themselves affect these individuals' structural power (except that ownership gives people certain deontic social rights and freedoms of course, but traditional ideal social-ontological theories seem capable of explaining this). Unfortunately, Burman's

---

<sup>1</sup>At one point Burman writes that power based on ideals or stereotypes is necessarily something individuals are aware of (p. 214), but this does not seem consistent with her suggestion that men's better chance of acquiring research funding exemplifies such power.

single example of structural power linked to class is not very helpful (pp. 224–225). She suggests that the large differences in the incidence of COVID-19 that prevailed between different neighbourhoods in Stockholm during the pandemic can be explained by class, since class affects the residents' housing conditions, opportunities to work from home or their access to private means of transportation. But are not the differences better explained by factors such as education, income level and occupation? Whether residents tend to live by owning the means of production or by selling their labour to those who do does not seem decisive. A different understanding of class than the Marxist one would probably better suit Burman's purposes.

Structural power and telic power are different types of social power. Burman's definition of social power is as follows: "an agent A has social power if and only if A has an ability, which is existentially and essentially dependent on the intentionality of two or more agents, to effect certain outcomes." (p. 225 fn. 13). Power derived from coercion by threat of physical violence is thus a form of social power, but the power to intentionally infect someone with a dangerous virus is not. The former is essentially dependent on the intentionality of the participants, while the latter may be temporarily tied to it (suppose the virus is passed via a mutual kiss, say). In the case of a threat of physical violence, the essential dependence is direct, but it can also be indirect, as when class gives rise to structural power.

Social power is a very general phenomenon, ubiquitous in social situations. Social science research is also interested in social power. Given the claim that social ontology should clarify the foundations of the social sciences, this phenomenon's generality and role within the social sciences constitute reason for Burman to put social power at the centre of her social-ontological theory. Perhaps she also focuses on social power because it highlights aspects of the social world relevant to social oppression (note, however, that according to Burman's definition of social power, agents can have social power even when their power relations in an everyday sense are equal).

Burman shows how her taxonomy and definitions of different types of social power are useful for calling attention to different social phenomena. However, it is unclear to me how the taxonomy and definitions can provide a deeper understanding or explanation of these phenomena. But perhaps it is the empirical social sciences rather than social ontology that should provide us with this, on Burman's view.

As for Burman's overall normative thesis—that the research field should continue in the direction of a completed paradigm shift from ideal to nonideal theory—it is unclear how this thesis is to be understood. On the one hand, she suggests that various fundamental disagreements within the field should be handled such that the field can enter a phase of something resembling Kuhnian normal science within a nonideal paradigm (p. 7). This suggests that the kind of ideal theories that abstractly try to explain how shared or collective intentionality directly or indirectly give rise to institutional or social phenomena should no longer be developed or discussed. On the other hand, Burman believes that the paradigm shift does not need to affect specific sub-areas that can be included under the umbrella of social ontology (broadly construed), such as work on collective intentionality or collective responsibility for example (p. 5). In any case, it does not seem desirable that a field of philosophical research puts fundamental disagreements behind or agrees on a common moral or political relevance criterion.

An argument that, according to Burman, speaks for a future completion of the paradigm shift is rooted in the idea that social ontology should analyse the foundations of the social sciences. Since the social sciences are interested in phenomena such as power and oppression, social ontology should therefore develop accounts and theories that clarify or provide theoretical foundations for research on these very phenomena and their consequences (p. 108 and p. 111). Burman is of course right that certain social science research puts such phenomena at centre stage. My impression, however, is that Burman has a somewhat narrow view of social science research. There are plenty of social-scientific research that does not focus on power relations, oppression, or social injustice as the paradigmatic social phenomena. Central questions can instead focus on how common knowledge or understanding enables and explains social phenomena, or on how people cooperatively coordinate various everyday activities.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the end goal Burman wants to see for the paradigm shift towards nonideal social ontology is simply that social ontology should reflect the breadth and diversity of the social sciences. In that case, I have no objections. It is undeniably positive that social-ontological research within contemporary analytical philosophy tackle a wider breadth of questions and contains a greater variety of approaches than before. Burman's *Nonideal Social Ontology* is a well-written and informative review of significant approaches and theories that currently populate the field.<sup>3</sup>

*Olle Blomberg*

---

<sup>2</sup>For two examples among many others, see Michael Suk-Young Chwe's *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination and Common Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 2013) or Lincoln Ryaves and James Schenkein's "Notes on the art of walking" ( in Roy Turner (ed.), *Ethnomethodology: Selected readings*, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1974, pp. 265–274). Based on empirical video material, the latter article deals with how people walk together rather than separately and how they demonstrate this to others – a focus that coincides with Margaret Gilbert's recurring example of a paradigmatic social phenomenon, namely that of two people walking together.

<sup>3</sup> For comments and discussion, thanks to Frans Svensson, Björn Petersson, Johan Brännmark and Åsa Burman.