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# The poverty of ontological reasoning<sup>1</sup>

Leonidas Tsilipakos

**Abstract:** This article argues against ontology as an intelligible project for social theory. Ontological questions have proliferated in social thought in the past decades mainly as a way of recasting traditional sociological questions about individuals/society and structure/agency. Far from being an advance in our understanding, however, this form of reasoning has frequently brought confusion. This is demonstrated with detailed reference to a contribution from an ongoing debate, centred on the issue whether social structures are causally efficacious. I argue that the ontological project is mainly fuelled by a misconception of language and that, once this picture is exposed as incoherent, ontology loses its intelligibility.

## Introduction

Concerns regarding *ontology* or *social ontologies* or the *ontological status*, as it is sometimes put, of *what* different kinds of words consequential to sociological thought *are about* have become quite prevalent during the last decades. For example, one of the main theoretical positions in contemporary sociology, namely Critical Realism, not only makes use of an ontology as fundamental if not foundational to its sociological programme (Bhaskar, 1998) but asserts that any social theory is necessarily committed to an (implicit or explicit) ontology (Archer, 1995). Apart from critical realists, examples of theorists who have pressed the question of (social) ontology are Bruno Latour (e.g. 2005), John Law (2004), Theodore R. Schatzki (2002) and John Searle, whose work (1995) has sparked debate across a number of journals since its publication.

Recently, there has been a notable exchange concerning social structure and the notion of emergence (Elder-Vass 2007a, 2007b; Porpora, 2007; Varela, 2007; King, 2007) which can be seen as the latest instalment in a debate spanning many decades (e.g. Porpora, 1989; Varela and Harré, 1996; Harré 2002a, 2002b). One feature of this debate which might account for its protracted nature is that it involves a number of issues fundamental to sociological inquiry (i.e., issues having to do with the form of explanation, the ascription of causality and the notion of causal powers, agency and structure, the relation between the micro and the macro, etc.) and, as such, is also recognizable as part of the dispute between individualists and collectivists regarding whether sociology should be concerned with the separate and *sui generis* order of ‘society’ or not.<sup>2</sup> While the issues in-

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this draft has been published in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 42 (2): 201-219.

<sup>2</sup> Frisby and Sayer (1986) (cited in Coulter, 2001) argue that sociology has unhinged itself from the debate on a suitable sociological concept of ‘society’, although, as Coulter notes, a host of other macro-concepts remain logically obscure. To give but an indication of why such problems appear e.g. with regard to the concept of society, if one does not pay attention to the details of the ‘logical behaviour’ of the concept, one easily ends up treating ‘society’ as always doing aggregate work, and therefore is taken to refer to a whole consisting of parts which either add up their sum is not enough to make that whole. Both *additivist* and *emergentist* conceptions rely on this ‘mereological’ understanding. On the other hand it is quite clear that sociology has utilised the many different senses of ‘society’ to bring under its aegis diverse forms of inquiry, which are thus justified as sociological. Consider, e.g. Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* (vol III p.712) on Durkheim’s ‘society’: Then arises the question, what is this common reference? It must be, says Durkheim, something we can respect in this specific sense, and in the sense we respect *only* moral authority. Hence the source of the sacredness of sacred things is the same as that of obligation to moral rules. It is

volved might then be seen as perennial ones, what is perhaps novel is that they are debated under the auspices of competing social ontologies. Indeed, approaching them in social ontology terms is a novelty of the past couple of decades or so that presumably constitutes our best current attempt to settle them. Having said this, however, this approach springs effortlessly out of (and sometimes incorporates) the two traditional ways in which the relationship between individuals and society is thought about. One response to the question has been methodological in that it asserts the priority or propriety of sociological explanation in terms of one or the other. The other response has been ‘ontological’ in that it asserts the existence of something more than individuals or, on the other hand, nothing but individuals. The first response fails because it attempts to settle the form of explanation *apriori*. The second response, it will be argued presently with reference to its contemporary form, is equally misguided and creates more problems than it solves as it treats the relationship between individuals and society as a matter of ‘what there is’, introducing at the same time a way of treating expressions (both those belonging to the ontological form of inquiry such as ‘real’, ‘exists’, ‘entity’ etc. and those having to do with society, such as ‘the state’, ‘capitalism’, ‘the economy’ etc.) which leads to conceptual confusion.<sup>3</sup> Social ontology projects, far from redressing what is problematic in the above responses, unfortunately constitute ‘more of the same’. In some cases, as in the critical realist project, confusion is compounded by running the question of ‘what there is’ together with the question of ‘what properly explains’ through the causal criterion of existence.

Thus, in this article I intend to question whether the recent wave of penetration of sociology by talk of ‘ontology’ constitutes an improvement over the way in which quite traditional issues are debated and whether, yet another turn to what are properly understood as philosophical ways of thinking, engenders anything but continuing confusion. The side-effect of the turn to questions of this sort is that a perspicuous answer to the issue of what disagreement between different sociological camps is about slips further away (Sharrock & Button, 2010).

Despite the fact that the recasting of methodological and theoretical questions in ontological terms wears its philosophical origin on its sleeve, it is perhaps worth rehearsing what the latter entails. Ontological questions are metaphysical questions in the sense that they attempt to settle what the ultimate reality of things is, and more specifically—by being ontological ones—they branch out in two related tasks: the attempt to provide a definitive answer concerning the being or nature of an entity, and the compilation of a

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“society”. This synthesis of what had been before regarded as quite disparate aspects of human life was a stroke of genius on Durkheim’s part of revolutionary importance. But this position is in need of further interpretation to clear up the difficulties left by Durkheim’s lingering positivism. Society in this context is not a concrete entity; it is, above all, not the concrete totality of human beings in relation to each other. It is a “moral reality”. One of the uses of society in our language and life reflects the above observation.

<sup>3</sup> Sören Stenlund’s remarks are incisive: “It should be noted that the ‘ontological question’ of whether ‘minds and mental entities exist’ makes no sense without the philosophical jargon in which ‘mental entities’ are spoken of as a kind of invisible thing in some place in the world (perhaps under the tops of people’s heads?). You must be trained in his jargon in order not to be just perplexed by the question, ‘Are there minds, feelings, intentions?’—especially when it is posed in the objective and serious tone characteristic of some philosophers of mind. What the question *really* means is something like the following: ‘Shall we adopt the notions of mind and mental entities as primitive notions in our *theories* of human language, action, and behaviour?’ There of course exists a legitimate and sometimes fruitful study of human behaviour and the human organism which takes the attitude and employs the methods characteristic of the natural sciences; but when the claims and motives are supposed to be philosophical, the situation becomes different. It is when one poses this kind of question that the analogy with explanation of phenomena in the natural sciences is most out of place.” (Stenlund, 1990: 22) We will see how with regard to the problem of social structures the two options sketched in the above passage have fed into the debates. But it is incorrect to render the problem as an ontological one. It is equally incorrect to render the problem as one of the form of explanation.

list of the *kinds* of entities populating reality, in other words a list of kinds of *real* things and real things only.

It might be objected to this reassertion of ontology as a metaphysical endeavour that the theoretical pursuit of ‘social ontology’ in the past decades has successfully distanced itself from metaphysics and that the term is used rather harmlessly to signify our chosen categorial scheme. Accordingly, questions about what the latter allows or entitles us to talk about are thought to be stripped of any metaphysical implications. This claim, however, fails on several counts:

Firstly, little, if anything, is usually done by way of attempting to disclaim the metaphysical baggage that the pursuit of ontology carries with it. Consider, for instance, Theodore Schatzki’s definition of ‘social ontology’ which, depending on one’s inclinations, can be read either as adding nothing to what social theory or sociology are about, or, alternatively, as an open invitation to debate ultimate reality: ‘Social ontology examines the nature and basic structure of social life and social phenomena’ (2005, p. 465). This is tied to the fact that diverse forms of inquiry can be described as ontological when the criterion for doing so is the applicability of such forms as ‘investigating X’s nature’ or ‘answering the question “what is X?”’.

Secondly, in cases where such an effort is in fact made (e.g. Bhaskar, 1975) the result ends up being contradictory,<sup>4</sup> precisely because there is no genuine intention to give up the transcendental to begin with. The unclarity concerning the commitment to the transcendental thus compounds the confusion regarding the nature of ontological projects.

Ontological projects, I submit, are prone to be conceptually muddled (and hence remain philosophical in a Wittgensteinian negative sense) not due to a lack of intellectual vigour but due to a certain misconception regarding language coupled with a form of questioning that is riddled with confusion. Doing ontology amounts, in effect, to having a license to subject all relevant expressions to the question ‘what entity does it refer to?’ and what these expressions are about, in turn, to the question ‘is it real?’ without any cause for concern. However, not only is it not true that it makes sense to ask the first question indiscriminately but nor is it the case that the second question is one determinate question (as J.L. Austin demonstrated long ago: 1962)

To make the case for the present argument I will attempt a detailed examination of a notable moment in the history of sociological debate where one of the acknowledged progenitors of the now very influential Critical Realism turned against it for being ‘metaphysically misguided’ about what is or can be real. Specifically, I will scrutinize Rom Harré’s (2002a, 2002b) attack on the idea that social structures are causally efficacious (and therefore real).<sup>5</sup> Lest I be misunderstood, it needs to be stressed that I have nothing against Harré in particular. The matters I attempt to address call for a detailed examination of our reasoning and Harré’s reasoning is chosen because it nourishes the extremely pervasive idea shared by many social scientists regarding the way our concepts relate to reality. This idea, which I will be arguing against, comes up in Critical Realist thinking, and it also underlies the way Harré is attacking Critical Realism, appearances notwithstanding<sup>6</sup>. Because the confusion in ontological reasoning is deep-seated and tricky to

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<sup>4</sup> As Justin Cruickshank (2004; 2010) has argued, for example, the critical realist commitment to avoiding the ‘epistemic fallacy’ (see next section) contradicts their attempted redefinition of ontology as not metaphysical, i.e. as concerned with the transitive rather than the intransitive, to use Bhaskar’s terms.

<sup>5</sup> Harré’s critique originated in a Symposium which focused on ‘promot[ing] inter-disciplinary discussions of how issues of philosophy and social theory can inform methodological insights and vice versa’ (Williams & May, 2002, p. 109). His published contribution was responded to (in terms of its broader implications) by Bob Carter (2002) and Piet Strydom (2002) to which, in turn, Harré rejoined (2002b).

<sup>6</sup> It might be said that in focusing on these specific articles I am being unfair to Harré, for in an earlier one (1997) he seems to be taking a position somewhat closer to the one I will be defending here. In fact, he

expose, I confine myself to establishing the latter's incoherence. I will not be providing a comprehensive criticism of any of the schools of thought involved and neither will I be providing a detailed account of any theory of causation (though I will try to make the point that the appeal to any such theory to establish matters of sense is misconceived).

The focus on Harré's argument is also strategic with regard to the position I wish to defend. In dealing with the question 'Are social structures causally efficacious?' Harré is interrogating its sense and might, therefore, be seen as providing us with a Wittgensteinian angle. However, despite Harré's invocations of Wittgenstein and the ascription of 'Wittgensteinianism' to his views by other parties (Strydom, 2002, p. 132) his discussion is *not* Wittgensteinian in that **a**) he treats the *sense* of the question 'Are social structures causally efficacious?' as *depending* on the ontological status of social structures, when in fact it is difficult to see the question of ontological status as anything other than a question about sense, i.e., a conceptual question that is settled by the 'grammar' of the language and **b**) he treats 'grammatical truths'<sup>7</sup> that should have the status of reminders about what it makes sense to say as carrying ontological, i.e. metaphysical weight

I seize this comparison with Wittgenstein in the hope of demonstrating that what a (genuinely alternative) Wittgensteinian move does is expose the ontological project as misguided by helping us dispose of one of its deeply entrenched sources: the idea that a language is a 'conceptual scheme'.

## Fixity of meaning: the demands of ontology on the use of expressions

Before I proceed to examine Harré's critique of the critical realists, I want to prepare that discussion by first examining ontology in terms of the demands it makes on the use of expressions. This will lead us to the examination of two (critical) realist staples, "the causal criterion", which is the critical realist means for deciding whether something is 'real', and their rendering of the 'real' as the 'non-observable'.

As noted earlier, it is an important fact that ontology has not shaken off a certain numbness as to its precise nature. Typically, in the explication of ontological inquiry words such as 'real', 'exist', 'reality', 'being' etc. are conscripted in uses that are seen as constitutive of what it is to do ontology. Thus ontology can be said to be the study of that which is, of what exists, of what is real, of the being of things, or the study of ultimate reality. Accordingly, questions such as, for example, 'is X real?', 'does X exist?' become pseudo-technical expressions<sup>8</sup> that are guaranteed to apply *without restriction* if the

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claims that "ascribing active powers to [social] structures, even if they existed, is scarcely intelligible enough to be the subject of a 'for or against' debate" (1997, p. 181). Thus, it may be thought that I am misinterpreting his position by not using that article as a context to the later ones. In my view, however, there is some inconsistency involved in that it is exactly what he dismissed in that former article that he goes on to do in the ones I am concerned with. In light of this, exactly what Harré's long-term position is must lie beyond the scope of this investigation. Here I am concerned with the way he enters the debate, and with how examining the latter can help us to reject ontology.

<sup>7</sup> Roughly, 'grammatical truths' are statements that are 'true' by virtue of the fact that they state (directly or indirectly) the rules for the use of expressions. Scare quotes clothe 'true' above to emphasise that 'grammatical truths' are not opposed to 'grammatical falsehoods' but to nonsense, and that to say that a grammatical statement is true is to say that these are the rules. Rules cannot be said to be true or false but can be said to determine what counts as (*not what is*) true and false (see Long & Jolley, 2010). Also, as P.M.S. Hacker argues, the class of grammatical truths is larger than the one of analytic ones and its distinction from empirical truths is not principally an epistemic one 'even though [the former are] of course a priori. It is a distinction between different roles and uses of propositions.' (2007, p. 18)

<sup>8</sup> The expressions ontological inquiry is tied to serve to turn disparate questions into standard ontological ones on the basis of word form. For example, here is how the form of words 'what is' can be used to incorporate questions within the remit of ontology: "it is useful to distinguish the ontological problem of

investigation is to retain its generality, which by definition it must (since ontology is concerned with what, everything, that there is). Such questions can also be used to decide which entities are to make up our ontological list. Now it is manifest that there is some relationship between these expressions in that when it comes to asking specific ontological questions we can say, seemingly, interchangeably: ‘Are social structures real?’ ‘Do social structures exist?’ ‘Are there social structures?’ It needs to be emphasised, nevertheless, that these expressions are only *partly* overlapping in their sense, and that contrary to the constitutive requirement, the relation between what is real, what exists and, say, what is part of reality can be more complicated than we are inclined to think when theorising. Let us briefly look at ‘real’ and ‘exists’ and then move to consider the differences between seemingly interchangeable expressions, which will, in turn, lead us to the examination of the causal criterion.

J.L. Austin (1962) characterising the behaviour of ‘real’ regarding some of its uses observed that the phrase ‘This object is real’ is quite dissimilar to ‘This object is red’ in that, among other things, ‘real’ is a) substantive hungry and b) a trouser word.

To use one of Austin’s examples, an object can be a real decoy duck (as opposed to a toy one) without being a real duck or, for instance, a musical instrument can be a real guitar without being a real Fender. Given these facts about the use of ‘real’ we have trouble understanding the characterisation of an object as real *simpliciter*.<sup>9</sup> The reason is that we need to know the answer to the question ‘a real what?’. The fact that the word ‘real’ -in these relevant uses- ‘hungers’ for a *what* is why Austin spoke of the word as being *substantive hungry*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a real duck can be real in the sense that it is not a toy, or not a fake, or not a decoy, or not a picture of, or not a hologram. Crucially *the sense in which it is real* depends on the kind of contrast that is being made and hence, in the positive-negative pair ‘real’ and, say, ‘decoy’ it is the negative that ‘wears the trousers’; in other words, the use of ‘real’ serves so as to exclude some way in which what is talked about is not real. Therefore, somewhat counter-intuitively, ‘real’ is dubbed a *trouser word*.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein, Frank Ebersole has pointed to one of the salient features of the use of ‘exist’:

“It is a common practice of philosophers to speak of “red” and “not-red” as both referring to properties. In general, where “W” is a property-word, then “not-W” is also a property-

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causality from the epistemological problem. The former problem concerns the question: what is causation?” (Kadesoja, 2007: 63).

<sup>9</sup> I am quite sceptical concerning whether such a characterisation is possible. For to speak of a ‘real object’ is already to suggest that it is real in the sense that objects are real (of course the indeterminacy then comes from the fact the ‘object’ needs to be specified too). What Austin has in mind presumably is the way of picking out an individual with the use of a variable without including any indication as to the kind of thing it is, and therefore not including any indication as to some of the ways in which that kind can be real.

<sup>10</sup> Austin notes in *Sense and Sensibilia* “Real’ is not, of course, the only word we have that is substantive—hungry. Other examples, perhaps better known ones, are ‘the same’ and ‘one’. The same team may not be the same collection of players; a body of troops may be one company and also three platoons. Then what about ‘good’? We have here a variety of gaps crying out for substantives—‘A good what?’, ‘Good at what?’—a good book, perhaps, but not a good novel; good at pruning roses, but not good at mending cars. (1962: 69-70)

<sup>11</sup> Austin adds in a footnote: “Compare, in this respect, ‘real’, ‘proper’, ‘free’, and plenty of others: ‘It’s realy — what exactly are you saying it isn’t? ‘I wish we had a proper stair — carpet’ —what are you complaining of in the one you’ve got? (That it’s improper?) ‘Is he free?’ —well, what have you in mind that he might be instead? In prison? Tied up in prison? Committed to a prior engagement?” (ibid.: 15). We might also add that ‘ordinary’ works in the same way. One needs to know both an ordinary what and (although knowing the *what* is knowing more or less the possible ways in which something can be extra-ordinary) what ‘ordinary’ is opposed to. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Ian Hacking in his *The Social Construction of What?* (ref) treats statements of the type ‘X is socially constructed’ as exhibiting those two features that Austin identified with respect to ‘real’.

word. If one adopted this style of talking, then one would presumably have to classify “exists” with the “not-W’s.” In keeping with this style we might say that “exists” refers to an oppositional property: sometimes to not being extinct, sometimes to not being mythical, and so on. The force of “exists” can be understood on any occasion only by knowing what it is opposed to. We might say it has a reactionary usage: it gets the content of its position almost entirely from the nature of the opposition (2001: 293–94).

Interestingly, the above observations on the uses of ‘real’ and ‘exist’ have very important implications for the pursuit of an ontology which, in one of its aspects, involves pronouncing once and for all on which kind of things are real and which are not. Given these ordinary facts consider what would happen if we tried to compile the list of all the kinds of things that **are/can be real**. The results of such an endeavour would run into the following complications: We would either end up with a list that would contain *all kinds* of things or *no kinds* of things, since we can either make a kind out of all things which can be said to be real (for even hallucinations can be real<sup>12</sup>) or admit only kinds whose subordinate objects can be unreal (*per impossibile*) in no other sense (for example, under physical objects there will fall tables some of which might not be real dining room tables, a direct consequence of Austin’s point that ‘real’ is not like ‘red’). It stands to reason then that there can be as many kinds of real things as substantives real can ‘devour’ and as many senses of ‘real’ as opposites it can be contrasted with. Given the *special contrast being made in every case*, it is dubious whether it makes sense to apply ‘real’ in *one of its senses* without restriction. That is, we understand what real as opposed to counterfeit money are, but what is it to have non-counterfeit fruit?

Naturally, those who see promise in the ontological mode of thinking are not bothered by these facts but attempt to render them irrelevant by not being concerned with ‘all real things’ but with ‘all *ultimately* real things’ or, to make plainer the fact that there is an *additional* intended contrast involved, with all ‘*really* real things’ (which let it be noted is not contrasted to “what appear to be real things” for that is opposed to “real things”!). They conceive of the quest for the ultimately real as imposing *an overriding criterion* which is thus universally applicable. Showing in a convincing way that this contrast is empty and that, therefore, this claim does not make the sense philosophers and theorists think it does is a formidable task which I cannot undertake here (but see e.g. Bouwsma, 1965, especially pp. 95-96 for an attempt to dispel an analogous misconception). It may be noted nevertheless that the shift from real to really real is as empty as the shift from how we tell that A is real to how we tell that anything is real (see Diamond, 1991) when how we tell a real piece of paper is quite different from how we tell a real 100€ note; they cannot both be subsumed under a single criterion.

Apart from the complexities just sketched there are also complications concerning the way the emblematic ontological words are related, for example ‘real’ and ‘reality’. We are tempted to forget that each word has a complex use of its own and in serving our ‘ontological’ purposes we portray that relation in the form of what seems a trivial and obvious truth in saying that ‘real things are part of reality’<sup>13</sup>. But what about ‘real ances-

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<sup>12</sup> I’m thinking here of an instructional context described by Howard Becker (*OUTSIDERS*) that learning to smoke Marijuana for pleasure depends on in which one learns to recognize the effects induced by the drug and can learn to identify what a real hallucination, one owed to the effects of the drug, is like.

<sup>13</sup> One of the perennial (indeed Socratic) ways we are led to such confusions is by assenting to truistic questions or dissenting to obviously false ones when we are not sure what we are saying. Socrates’ truistic or flagrantly false formulations would be designed to solicit the assent or dissent of his interlocutor upon production of which he would then proceed to demonstrate incoherence – the interlocutor would then find themselves where they didn’t expect. Suppose someone were to ask us whether reality consists of what is unreal. Surely, we would protest at the self-evident nature of the question, and we would say that it is obvious that reality cannot consist of what is unreal. It is only a short step from there to concluding that reality must consist of what is real.

tors' and 'real hallucinations', are they part of reality?<sup>14</sup> To the extent that this question encourages us to give a quick 'yes' or 'no' answer it is misleading. For as it stands, the question calls for clarification (cf. PI §62).

It seems an easy task to divide what is real from what is unreal, but as argued, that appearance is wrong, for the moment we try to apply the dichotomy exhaustively, in other words, the moment we demand a yes or no answer in each case, regardless of whether the words in fact apply in the same way, if at all, we create difficulties for ourselves. It is thus bad idea to say that everything is real or unreal, or to mention other exhaustive dichotomies, observable or non-observable, meaningful or meaningless. Take for instance the third dichotomy. One can reason thus: To be meaningful is to have meaning. Thus the question 'does it have a meaning?' can decide the matter in each case. If all meaningful things have a meaning, and words are meaningful, therefore all words have a meaning – accordingly the expression 'what is the meaning of X?' is predicable of all words. But, to give a minimal counterexample, it is an important fact that we do not say 'what is the meaning of red?' when asking about the word 'red'. The question about the meaning of red' is a question about what the colour symbolises; not about what the word means. Putting the word in quotations, it may be suggested, might solve the problem of exactly what we are asking, but 'the meaning of the word 'red'' is also awkward. Asking about it could elicit the response 'red is a colour' but we would not say that the word 'red' means a colour, nor that the colour red is the meaning of the word 'red'.

What these complications show is that the conscription of forms of words to do ontology, or in the case immediately above linguistic theory, cannot work because it amounts to trying, *per impossible*, to substitute objective for indexical expressions (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970) in order to guarantee a **uniformity/ fixity of meaning** that is required by the universal scope of ontology (applying to all entities)<sup>15</sup> or linguistic theory (applying to the whole of language). The price to pay for **pressing certain forms of expression** as applicable in all cases is too high; it is nothing less than conceptual confusion.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Some further examples of the same kind might be instructive: Champlin considers "A cold moves as a capital moves... there are many rivers between Aix and Paris, which the king and his courtiers had to cross, but the capital was never in motion between them. Surprisingly, perhaps, *not everything which moves has been in motion*" (1989: 43) (my italics). Naturally, Wittgenstein also emphasized how we could be led astray by neglecting the nuances in seemingly tautologous expressions. "Consider well how we use the word "recognize". I recognize the furniture in my room, my friend whom I see every day. But no 'act of recognition' takes place." (Zettel §202)

<sup>15</sup> It might be said that the conscription of ordinary words in the service of ontological projects does not require that they all be thought to ask the same ontological question. This might be true for ontology loosely conceived but not for ontology as a comprehensive list of what exists or what is real. The latter requires that all members of the list exist/ are *real in the same sense*. Furthermore it also implicitly requires that the classes of what exists and what is real are co-extensive.

<sup>16</sup> In analytic philosophy which retains the linguistic ideal of formal logic, the conscripted words often derive their fixity of meaning from the mathematical-logical calculus, in other words, they constitute ways of reading in natural language, formulae containing the existential quantifier. Thus, via their mapping onto the calculus as paraphrases, equivalence is asserted between expressions based on their formal similarities. In the following passage Sören Stenlund describes this equivalence when it is put to use in order to ensure the uniform understanding of 'refers to', 'is a name of' and 'denotes', as what it is supposedly for language to refer: "It is a typical feature of this grammatical scheme as well as of others that it is connected with similarities in the mere linguistic forms or paraphrases of ordinary language. The scheme is isolated by focusing on the surface grammar of language... the idea behind the grammatical scheme for 'reference' is of course that it is meant to be applicable and valid in all cases where expressions of the form X refers to Y, X is a name of Y, X denotes Y are acceptable paraphrases" (1996: 205) It is precisely this procedure, as Stenlund notes, which cuts "across several conceptually different *forms of use*".\_(idem) (my emphasis). Even without the help of the calculus, however, the seeming tautologies that are generated by connecting expressions based on their etymological or morphological connections while neglecting their use are bound to lead to



## The causal criterion and realist ‘non-observeables’ also require fixity of meaning

The purpose of the discussion so far has been to sensitise us to some of the facts about the use of words as a preliminary for the issues to come. If we are to understand the question whether social structures are real then we need to know what critical realists wish to oppose ‘real’ to. To anticipate, it seems that causal inefficacy is the intended opposition, in other words the operative identity is that ‘what is real is what is causal’. This is then the universal criterion proposed by critical realists, namely, the causal criterion.

“the causal criterion turns on the capacity of the entity whose existence is in doubt to bring about changes in material things. Notice that a magnetic or gravitational field satisfies this criterion, but not a criterion of perceivability. On this criterion, to be is not to be perceived, but rather (in the last instance) just to be able to do. The standard hermeneutical fork, generated by the conceptual/ perceptible dichotomy of classical empiricist ontology, which [is] invoked by Winch, ignores precisely those possibilities opened up by a causal criterion for ascribing reality. Thus both parties [that is ‘interpretivists’ and ‘positivists’] to the naturalist dispute have assumed that the social must be either merely empirically real or in effect transcendently ideal, so producing either a conceptually impoverished and deconceptualizing empiricism, or a hermeneutics drained of causal import and impervious to empirical controls’ (Bhaskar, 1998: 12)

Now we have already considered that fixing an opposing term to ‘real’ which purportedly allows us to apply the question in only one sense of real, for example one based on the causal criterion does not get us out of the difficulty when it comes to ontology. For, as we saw, the ontological requirement that we stipulate the general application of a standard form of words cannot be met without requiring immense amount of clarification as to the sense in which it applies in each particular case, which means that it is not a single criterion at all. Now Bhaskar<sup>17</sup> does exactly this – he attempts to fix the following form: to be real is to be causal or to have real effects.<sup>18</sup>

Granted, the equation of something being real with being a cause or having effects in a certain sense may have its home in certain activities. For example: -‘Is this snake real?’, -‘Yes, be careful it will bite you, it already bit Mary’. But there are only certain kinds of cases where this is true. Furthermore, the concept of cause is *not any more uniform* than ‘real’ is (requiring further clarification as to its sense in each particular case), and, besides, there is a family of causal concepts applying equally to what we would be rather reluctant to class as real. Consider some simple cases:

- The thought of losing the case made me shiver.
- Taking the shadow for a ghost caused me to realize that I was excessively apprehensive.
- Catching with my eye what I thought was a ghost made me jump.

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confusion. We will expand in Chapter X on the forcing of a mode of expression in terms of operating on a ‘grammatical scheme’.

<sup>17</sup> Consider also what Archer has to say: ‘ontological status needs to be accorded to such aggregate (and emergent) social properties precisely **because** they are mechanisms facilitating or frustrating various policies’ (1990 : 87, quoted in Elder-Vass 2007a: 27) and ‘The existence of structural properties and powers is established by the *causal criterion*, that is in terms of generative effects’( Archer 2000 quoted in Varela 2007:204)

<sup>18</sup> According to Pleasants, Bhaskar’s causal criterion is no criterion at all: “... if the (unperceivable) hypothesised entity produces perceivable effects then it is ‘real’. But this so-called ‘criterion’ is just a tautology; it says no more than ‘if X exists it is real’. Nobody could sensibly deny that an entity which causes changes in material things is real (such a denial would be self contradictory). Bhaskar’s ‘causal criterion’ is really an analytic statement, not a *real* criterion. What he needs— *per impossible*—is a criterion that can be used to decide *which* (if any) of the competing hypothesised entities is responsible for producing the observed effect. (Pleasants, 1999: 193 n10)

- His lifelike hologram brought tears to my eyes.
- Their determination brought shame to my red face.

As is evident from Bhaskar's quotation, the identification of what is real with what has real effects feeds back into the ontology and enables its stratification (actual, real, experiential) by extension towards the non-observable. The rationale seems to be that since there are things which can be said to cause but are not observable, therefore the real is not only that which we can perceive. The improvement of this conception is presumably most pronounced when contrasted with an empiricist ontology which is limited to observables.<sup>19</sup> However, Bhaskar does not eschew the selfsame impoverished empiricist understanding of what is observable and, most importantly, *embraces* the dichotomy of observables and non-observables.

Dichotomies, as we saw, are another way of legislating the unrestricted application of a criterion. But there are concepts in the language which allow for the connection with the question of observability or non-observability and those where that connection is not (yet) provided for. There is what is observable, non-observable and where the notion of observability or non-observability have no application (yet).<sup>20</sup> The question of the observability or non-observability of society or the social is such a case as the question is not intelligible as it stands.<sup>21</sup> It is thus better to avoid giving a yes or no answer to the question whether the social is observable or non-observable. Consider, however, what Margaret Archer has to say on 'non-observables':

"Some of the non-observable social factors which concern us may be open to humanistic hermeneutics (my motives in writing this book or yours in reading it), but frequently we just are dealing with non-observables which remain that way (i.e. they are distinct from a psycho-analyst's attempts to help clients to awareness of something unconscious). In this category would go international finance markets, institutional contradictions, ecological imbalance, third dimensional power or ideological mystification." (Archer, 2000: 48-49)

Now it is hardly clear what it means to say that institutional contradictions are non-observable (what would it mean to observe them?) and even further that they are non-observable entities (recall Bhaskar's quotation)! On the other hand, speaking of the non-observability of motives constitutes a return to the locus classicus of the in principle 'non-observable' which is, of course, the human mind.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Implicit in the ... critique of empiricist ontology and the discussion of laws of tendency was an attack upon the concept of an 'empirical world'. Interpreting 'empirical' here as 'that which is observable', the concept of 'empirical world' arises from an illegitimate reduction of an ontological question to an (empiricist) epistemological one. Now it would be extraordinary if 'the real' just happened to be exactly coextensive with the limits of our sensory powers. (Sayer, 1998: 133)"

<sup>20</sup> The distinction could be made by saying that there are observables, unobservables and non-observables which are understood also as non-unobservables. Although some critical realists use non-observables apart from unobservables, I do not think that they are using it in this way.

<sup>21</sup> William Outhwaite, for example, argues that we must accept that 'Society is not Observable' because "There is no such thing as observing society *as such*." (1998: 284). But if the latter is true then there is no such thing as not observing society either.

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, to treat mental things as 'non-observable' is to misunderstand them. If only more attention were paid to Ryle's insight regarding the mental/physical problem, whose existence is owed to the misapplication of a number of concepts which can apply to the physical but not to the concept of mental. "The differences between the physical and the mental were thus represented as differences inside the common framework of the categories of 'thing', 'stuff', 'attribute', 'state', 'process', 'change', 'cause', 'effect'. Minds are things but different sort of things from bodies; mental processes are causes and effects, but different sorts of causes and effects from bodily movements. And so on." (Ryle, 1949: 20)

To buttress the critical realist stratified ontology, the notion of non-observability is also dubiously extended to causal powers.<sup>23</sup> Varela and Harre (1996) seem to think that this is the only reason that Bhaskar has for pursuing the transcendental, that is the fact that causal powers are not exhausted by their manifestation. It is true that a power is not identical to its exercise, but this does not imply that the power lies in any transcendental realm (see Hacker, 2007: ch.2). To say that powers are non-observable is at the very best to mislead. For example, the power to drive a car well is something you can observe when you see me driving. That I do not lose the power to drive well when I am not driving does not mean that the power is present somewhere but non-observable, least of all in some transcendental realm. To witness my power to drive well the only thing you have to do is see me drive and that is what observing my power amounts to. When I am not exercising my powers they are neither observable nor non-observable.

Furthermore, no support can be forthcoming from Bhaskar's idea that "tendencies may be possessed unexercised, exercised unrealized, and realized unperceived (or undetected) by men" (1975: 175) because it is deeply incoherent. If we look at the examples he invokes<sup>24</sup> it is clear that none of them warrant his conception: **a) To have the ten-**

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<sup>23</sup> (Sayer, 2000: 12)

Whereas the real in this definition refers to the structures and powers of objects, the *actual* refers to what happens if and when those powers are activated, to what they do and what eventuates when they do, such as when the bureaucracy's powers are activated and it engages in activities such as classifying and invoicing, or the previously idle person does some work. If we take the example of the Marxist distinction between labour power and labour, the former (the capacity to work) and the physical and mental structures from which it derives, is equivalent to the level of the real, while labour (working), as the exercise of this power, and its effects, belong to the domain of the actual.<sup>3</sup>

The *empirical* is defined as the domain of experience, and insofar as it refers successfully, it can do so with respect to either the real or the actual<sup>4</sup> though it is contingent (neither necessary nor impossible) whether we know the real or the actual. While we may be able to observe things such as the structure of an organization or a household, as well as what happens when they act, some structures may not be observable. Observability may make us more confident about what we think exists, but existence itself is not dependent on it. In virtue of this, then, rather than rely purely upon a criterion of observability for making claims about what exists, realists accept a causal criterion too (Collier, 1994a). According to this a plausible case for the existence of unobservable entities can be made by reference to observable effects which can only be explained as the products of such entities. Both natural and social scientists regularly make such claims. For example, many linguists have inferred the existence of generative grammar from the ability of speakers to construct novel but grammatically correct sentences. A crucial implication of this ontology is the recognition of the possibility that powers may exist unexercised, and hence that what has happened or been known to have happened does not exhaust what could happen or have happened. The nature of the real objects present at a given time constrains and enables what can happen but does not pre-determine what will happen. Realist ontology therefore makes it possible to understand how we could be or become many things which currently we are not: the unemployed

**Roy Harris's description in *The Language Myth* of a similar move conducted by early linguistic theory** is instructive: "The programmatic slogan [by Max Muller –a grammarians funeral] 'We do not want to know languages, we want to know language' itself points to the ultimate crux of the problem. The abstract object of knowledge, 'language', is at double remove from direct observation. It is once removed in that we cannot hope to see the workings of language except insofar as they are manifested through particular languages. But it is twice removed in that particular languages, as such, are not directly available to observation either. All that we can observe directly (in the sense in which 'direct observation' is conducted in the natural sciences generally) are specific speech events, utterances, inscriptions, and reactions to them by members of a linguistic community." (p.44)

<sup>24</sup> Consider: "Now when a tendency is exercised unfulfilled two things are not in doubt: (a) that something actually happens, towards explaining which the exercise of the tendency goes some way; and (b) that something is really going on, i.e. there is a real generative mechanism at work, which accounts for the influence of the factor the tendency represents in the generation of the event. In the case of (a) there are two conceptual traps. The first is to think of the exercise of the tendency unfulfilled as an action without results, rather than as an action with modified results. Something does happen; and the tendency, as one of the influences at work, helps to explain what. The second is to think of it as if it were an action fulfilled, i.e. in

*tendency to lose one's temper* means that one is of a certain character that makes them respond in an angry or irate way, given circumstances where they are challenged, annoyed, inconvenienced etc. As such, one can possess that tendency without always 'exercising it', but one cannot possess it without ever having 'exercised' it. One manifests that tendency (because it is not clear that it make sense to say that one exercises it, otherwise that person would be faking losing their temper – losing one's temper is not a power but rather a liability) e.g. when in a particular occasion they respond angrily to, say, a mild provocation. This, if anything, is also to realize that tendency. To say that one exercises the tendency to lose his temper without realizing it is unintelligible. **b)** To say that *someone has the tendency to win* is not to report what he will do given certain circumstances (because it is not entirely up to him) but what the usual outcome of him competing is. Yet again having the tendency to win cannot be possessed unexercised, i.e. unless someone has frequently won in the past. Although one can fail to win once or more and yet not lose the *power* to win, it is not clear that this is so for their *tendency* to win - which is a statistical notion and which one does not 'possess' in the same way. **c)** Finally, and most importantly, *winning is not the realization of the tendency to run fast, running fast is*. When one is running fast they are not exercising their tendency to win, which remains unfulfilled if in the end they lose; they are exercising their tendency to run fast. And it does not make sense to say that they are exercising but failing to realize their tendency to run fast when unsuccessfully trying to run fast; they are just not running fast.

To bring the discussion of 'non-observables' to a close, there is a pervasive analogy in critical realism with the postulated entities of natural science (e.g. the Higgs boson), but this analogy is completely out of place,<sup>25</sup> as the difficulty for social theory is to specify *what we mean* by saying that society, institutional contradictions, financial systems, and the rest are non-observable and not (before we can do that) to find a technical means of detection (which is what is lacking in the postulation of particles in physics). This discrepancy is also obscured by calling 'non-observable' what seem as being a matter of large scale (society) or are small and hidden (the mind). But, again, the problem is one of understanding what it would mean to observe 'society' not one where there is some restriction to what we can intelligibly do. Once we specify what we would count as observing society or the mind, we see that there is nothing in principle non-observable about mental things or about 'large scale processes'. For instance, one can witness the depression in one's neighbour and at the same time the effects of the economic crisis on Greek society in one's neighbourhood. And, with the possession of the required means,

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terms of its fulfilment. It is a mistake to think of the exercise of a tendency in terms of the imagery, metaphors or descriptions appropriate to its fulfilment. Yet Mill in his unofficial doctrine of tendencies in effect does this when he argues that 'although two or more laws interfere with one another, and apparently frustrate or modify one another's operations, yet in reality all are fulfilled, the collective effect being the exact sum of the causes taken separately'.<sup>40</sup> Mill's mistake here is to suppose that whenever a tendency is set in motion the effect must be in some sense (or in some realm) occurring (as if every time we ran fast we had to be in some way winning). But Geach (and following him Ryan) in ridiculing this position make the converse mistake of supposing that whenever no effect (of a given type) occurs, nothing can be in motion or really going on.<sup>41</sup> But here Mill is right and Geach is wrong. (p.89) Balaam's ass is pulled in two ways; we do just manage to keep our tempers; the market equilibrium is explained in terms of an exact balance of buying and selling; when the beam finally collapses it is due to the real cumulative effect of the woodrot. Mill's mistake is to think of the exercise of the tendency under the description of its fulfilment, as if Balaam's ass, in order to be pulled two ways, had actually to go in both directions. Geach's mistake is to suppose that because neither tendency is fulfilled neither tendency can be in play. In other words, they both make the mistake of seeing the fulfilment of a tendency a condition of its exercise." (1975: 90) (my emphasis)

<sup>25</sup> "...realists also differ from empiricists in the status they accord to unobservables. Scientists routinely assume the existence of unobservables depending on them both to predict novel facts and to intervene successfully in the world" (Shapiro, 2005 :39)

e.g. as part of a research programme, one can also witness the latter in a large number of communities around the country. There is no ‘non-observability problem’ which requires us to postulate transcendental entities or powers.<sup>26</sup> The illusion that there is derives from aping natural science, and from the idea that ‘observable’ and ‘non-observable’ possess a fixity of meaning, that is apply in the same sense and without need for clarification to all expressions, including, for example, ‘positrons’, ‘mental events’, ‘society’, ‘the social’, ‘the economy’ and ‘the state’.

We have seen that the mistaken idea that expressions have a fixed sense throughout their universal application, is one constitutive of critical realist theory, its ‘causal criterion’ and its postulation of ‘non-observable’ entities, powers and tendencies, and, most importantly, of ontology whose procedures of inquiry are constructed on this basis. With the above in mind, we can proceed to examine Harré’s critique of the critical realists and whether it fares any better.

## Harré’s critique

Harré frames his argument as an intervention in the debate between critical realists and social constructionists where, despite Roy Bhaskar having acknowledged him as an intellectual progenitor of Critical Realism (CR), he assumes a position much closer to the, broadly conceived, Social Constructionist (SC) camp. Harré’s motivation in engaging with CR is illustrated in the following excerpt:

‘... identify what it is that bothers me about the enthusiastic and well-intentioned claim that social structures are causally efficacious and therefore if we want to ameliorate our lives we should change them. The focus of Critical Realists and other such well-meaning but metaphysically misguided people being on constituted authorities, economic systems and mythical things of that sort. I claim that these exist only as *discursive* categories.’ (2002a, p. 121)

In order to understand what the direct target of Harré’s attack could be, it is useful to enquire into the premises of the Critical Realist<sup>27</sup> position. CR avoids what Bhaskar (1975) terms the ‘epistemic fallacy’, viz., equating what there is with what we can know: the former is not exhausted by the latter. The following passage from *A Realist Theory of Science* exhibits the logic of arguing this:

‘Things exist and act independently of our descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions. Descriptions belong to the world of society and of men; objects belong to the world of nature. We express [our understanding of] nature in thought. Science, then, is the systematic attempt to express in thought the structures and ways of acting of things that exist and act independently of thought. The world is structured and complex and not made for men. It is entirely accidental that we exist, and understand something about our bit in it.’ (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 250)

I will avoid getting into how the above (seemingly inappropriate conception when it comes to the ‘social world’) might apply to ‘social science’. After all, that is what *The Possibility of Naturalism* sets out to demonstrate and indeed qualifications peculiar to the varying subject matters of different sciences are offered. Nevertheless, the above excerpt is instructive in that it provides a clear formulation of the standard against which SC is found wanting. Based on the general conception of *science* articulated in Bhaskar’s reason-

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<sup>26</sup>Capaldi puts it boldly and simply in *The enlightenment project*: “Realist theory can never discover new entities, it just invents new terms”

<sup>27</sup> Critical realism is treated as uniform and, no doubt, simplified in what follows. To my defence I offer that the focus of this article is on the reasoning exhibited by the parties in the debate; I do not pretend to provide a detailed treatment of critical realism.

ing, social structures are postulated as (one of) the proper objects of social science by way of a ‘transcendental deduction’ (1998) —i.e., argument that is directed from the actuality of science to the conditions of its possibility— and their reality is established by appealing to the causal criterion. Having established an allegedly ontological basis, the implication for the study of society, as spelled out in Margaret Archer’s work, is that ‘both agency and structure have real causal powers and properties *sui generis*’, which serves as the foundation to a methodology which defines the objective of social science, as ‘examining the interplay between these two sets of powers and properties’ (Carter, 2002, p. 134).

Although Harré’s attack is directed at the above conception (especially as it relates to the way in which it is possible to effect social change), it should be emphasised that, according to Strydom’s understanding, the attack is not limited to the work of critical realists as such, but has broader and devastating implications for sociology and social theory (2002, p. 124). Presumably, Harré’s attack is seen to be devastating not only in that, as Carter (2002, p. 134) registers, it denies the viability of a methodological programme which purports to investigate the interplay between structure and agency, but because it is seen as pulling the rug under the feet of sociologies that wish to talk about something more than individuals, it is seen, that is, as removing the necessary ontological foundation,<sup>28</sup> by proposing a more restricted ontology.

Having briefly sketched parts of CR and what is perceived to be at stake I now pick up the thread of Harré’s argument again. It is instructive to consider at this point exactly what his contention is. Harré is not flatly claiming that ‘there is no such thing as’ social structures but, somewhat more subtly, that social structures are not the *kind of thing* critical realists imagine them to be.<sup>29</sup> Harré’s argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* in that he starts with two conceptions of causality and by examining what they can apply to ends up with the thesis that social structures cannot be causally efficacious and that, therefore, given the critical realist ascription of reality based on the causal criterion, they are not real ‘in any *substantive* sense’ (Harré, 2002b, p. 147). I will go on to briefly sketch his argument but I will only elaborate on the parts relevant to the problem of ontology.

Firstly, Harré makes the (controversial) move of importing two conceptions of causality from the physical sciences (and in this he is no different from the Critical realists), namely ‘event causality’ and ‘agent causality’. These he admits as the only moulds in which social structures will have to fit if they are to be thought of as causally efficacious. He then delimits structures as being either 1) institutions i.e. roles together with relationships between roles or 2) acts (from which follows a static or dynamic conception of social structure, respectively). Social structures are understood by Harré to be secondary products ‘of the activity of people acting according to rules, customs and conventions’

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<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Strydom in his response quickly seeks to restore the basis that has been taken away: ‘As I see it, the two problems can be avoided only by means of an interactionist theory that is based on a broader ontological foundation.’ (2002, p. 125)

<sup>29</sup> Strydom, who, as we noted above, responds to the wider implications of Harré’s attack states what he finds objectionable as follows and in doing so shows how liable he is to exhibit what Harré charges him with: ‘What I challenge is *his claim that the social scientific notion of structure is a myth* and, its corollary, that sociologists – and I include myself among them – are ‘well-meaning but metaphysically misguided people’ (2002, p. 124) (my italics). One could take issue here with Strydom’s talk of a *concept* being a myth. It makes sense to say either 1) Social structures as conceived by social science are mythical, i.e. do not exist or 2) That social structures exist is a myth, but it is not clear what it would mean to say that the concept of social structure is a myth. Witches do not exist, they are mythical creatures, that they exist is a myth, but is the concept of a witch a myth? In the current context where a sound understanding of *what* is claimed to be mythical is fundamental, such mistakes are consequential.

(2002, p. 115). Harré adds the proviso that we should be cautious in our conceptualisation of rules, etc. He argues:

‘social reality is exhausted by what people do. The rules by which they manage it must not be reified into a transcendent realm from which they exert their benign influence. What reality do they have? Again we must distinguish a mode of being as immanent in practices, many of which are discursive, and a mode of being as concrete instructions, which are real as instances of discourse. In short, *the only reality norms and rules have is of the same ontological status as the activities they ‘govern’, namely discursive acts.*’ (idem, p. 116) (Harré’s italics)

Taking stock of the fact that the ontological project has already started taking its toll in placing undue emphasis on statements of the sort ‘social reality is exhausted by people and what they do’, I would like to move on to the next (and final for our purposes) move in Harré’s argument, which is to lay down the condition for ascribing causal efficacy as being a powerful particular, and to claim that neither social structures (conceived as acts or role structures), nor rules and conventions are powerful particulars:

Now we have to ask whether any of the social things we have identified could possibly meet these conditions for ascriptions of causal efficacy. There were roles, rules and the acts that people jointly performed within the frames of possibility that they determined. But both rules and acts are discursive *products*. What is the category of efficacious agent that brings them into being? Only persons. No rule or convention is the kind of thing that could be an efficacious agent. (2002a, p. 117)

One can claim that thus far Harré’s attack has been in tune with the Critical Realist programme in that he has sought to refute it by its own account, that is, by showing that social structures do not meet the causal criterion. The conclusion based on this is that only persons are causally efficacious agents and that our ontology should contain persons and their actions but not social structures. It is the grounds and status of this conclusion that I wish to question. Before doing so, however, it is useful to return to Harré’s initial statement about how he will address the question of whether social structures are causally efficacious.

### **A Wittgensteinian move?**

In this section I attempt to demonstrate that what Harré says has an only superficial Wittgensteinian character and, also, why the comparison with Wittgenstein is a clue to what remains unchallenged but deeply problematic in both Harré’s and Critical Realist accounts. Harré frames his argument in the following way:

If we try to come to a judicious conclusion about the question it will not be a simple yes or no answer. The question of the question itself is a critical one, that is whether it makes any sense at all, in short does the question that the referents of social structure expressions could be causally efficacious make sense. At the end of the day I hope to show that such referents are not the kind of entities that could be causally efficacious. I’m not saying that there are no such things as social structures, but they’re not the right kind of thing to do the sort of work that ‘some people’ would like them to do. (2002a, p. 112)

From what Harré says here it is clear that he is addressing the question in a rather special way, in that he is challenging the question itself. In examining whether the question makes sense or not, the crucial test upon which the sense of the question depends is, he submits, ‘what kind of thing’ social structures are. Notice then that Harré takes a question about ‘grammar’ (to use Wittgenstein’s term), i.e., about what it makes sense to say, and treats it as depending on a consideration of ‘what kind of thing something is’, which is itself understood not as a question about the ‘logical status’ of a concept (another way

of talking about what it makes sense to say) but as a *separate question* about the *ontological status* of an expression's referent. Furthermore, and for all of Harré's objections to the fallacious and reificatory metaphysical talk of real structures (2002b), he seems to be presuming that social structure expressions are 'referring expressions', instead of performing the more radical move (which I wish to argue is the required one) that would challenge whether social structure expressions *can indeed be said to refer to any entities*, where **a**) 'refer to an entity' is understood in a restricted way, by making a *picture* out of one of the many uses of 'refer' (e.g. 'I am referring to this piece of furniture' and not, say, 'I am referring to your bad habit'), **b**) 'entity' is thought to be applicable without restriction but is really understood along the paradigm of physical things (is your bad habit an entity?), and/or **c**) the requirement that expressions be referring is understood as a condition of their having meaning, an old philosophical idea which was laid to rest by P.F. Strawson (1950), among others.

Again, I stress that the reason I have placed such emphasis on the 'Wittgensteinian move' is because Harré's characterisation of what he is doing is clearly meant to follow a Wittgensteinian line and because the comparison with Wittgenstein helps us examine *the status* of Harré's conclusions that only persons are causally efficacious, by pressing the question of whether they are reminders about what it makes sense to say or metaphysical theses.

Nevertheless, it needs to be established in somewhat more detail what the Wittgensteinian move regarding the problem of the sense of an expression could be. Stanley Cavell provides some guidance concerning the difficulties in responding to a non-sensical question, specifically with Wittgenstein's response to the question of whether I *know* I am in pain:

Other philosophers, I believe, are under the impression that Wittgenstein denies that we can know what we think and feel ... But the 'can' and 'cannot' in these remarks are grammatical; they mean 'it makes no sense to say these things' (in the way we think it does); it would, therefore, equally make no sense to say of me that I do not know what I am thinking, or that I do not know I am in pain. The implication is not that I cannot know myself, but that knowing oneself – though radically different from the way we know others – is not a matter of cognising (classically 'intuiting') mental acts and particular sensations (Cavell, 1971, p. 189)

Based on the above, it is clear that to show that the question of the causal efficacy of causal structures is senseless entails rejecting the view that they are not causally efficacious as senseless too. To illustrate this point by using an example of patent nonsense, the proper response to the question 'Does music go anywhere when we do not listen to it?' is not 'No, it does not go anywhere' but 'No, (if we are still tempted to say 'No') because the question is senseless and equally senseless is the response that it does not go anywhere'.<sup>30</sup> Harré though, in providing an argument in support of the thesis that social structures are not causally efficacious is attempting to *refute* the Critical realists, a move which amounts to proving an opposing thesis and, therefore, he is clearly presupposing rather than challenging the sense of the question. Furthermore, he is treating what it makes sense to say as picking out some ultimate reality captured by the parsimonious ontology he is substituting for the critical realist one. Harré's reminder that in doing sociology we should keep Ockham's razor in mind is ample evidence that it is an overpopulated ontology he is against and not the idea of ontology per se.

In order to bring into sharper view the fact that the idea of ontology remains intact, and to show that this is more generally the case, consider the following remarks on

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<sup>30</sup> Another way of making this distinction is to say that the relevant response is not 'It *does not* go anywhere' but 'It does not *go* anywhere'.



the concept of class (my emphasis in what follows). First, May and Williams characterising Harré's position:

*'... the only powerful particulars which are held to exist in the social world are persons. Class, for example, is a taxonomic term that has no causal powers. It is not a property that may simply be ascribed to an individual in terms of their positioned capacities, but one that exists in the mind of the classifiers and so is not a property of the social world. This and other macrocollectivities are viewed as rhetorical devices with clear implications for a social theory, such as critical realism, which has transformational intentions.'* (2002, p. 108)

The above remark is drawn from an earlier article of Harré's where he argues against:

*... [the] temptation to use 'power' for the way macro-entities can exert influences of one sort or another. I take this usage to be transparently rhetorical since it is clearly involved in exploiting the responsibility implications of that use, so that a class that is said to have power is thereby implied to have responsibility. Once this kind of loose talk is allowed we are well on the way to the mystification of macro-politics.* (Harré, 1981, p. 157)

Next, let us take a look at Strydom objecting to Harré's position:

*It is obvious that such a psychological, agency-theoretical understanding of social structure leaves no room at all for what is social scientifically accepted as central structural features of social reality and organizing principles of social positions, namely class, race and gender. In fact, Harré is quite explicit about this. According to him, problems of equal access do not derive from structural variables but are rather attributable to the incompetence of the disadvantaged. For social structural constraints, in his view, are no more and no less than 'just story-lines'.* (2002, p. 128)

And the final excerpts are, first, from Harré's initial contribution and then from his rejoinder to Carter and Strydom. I include some additional material regarding explanation which I will utilise shortly:

*I am not sure what is left of the position of someone like Margaret Archer. We must dismiss any such concept as 'someone's class position' as no more than a façon de parler. It no more explains the predicament of Ted Benton's pensioner than does being a baron explains why some people were so worked up at Runnymede.* (2002b, p. 146)

*'The people are like the magnetic poles we invoke to explain the pattern of iron filings through which the structure of the field is manifested. They are the underlying generators of the structure. They are a necessary foundation on which the possibility of social structures depends.'* (2002a, p. 114)

*'Mistaking a taxonomic category for a substantive entity. The reification of the concept of 'working class' and similar macro-concepts is a case in point. You do not explain why a lion prefers meat by telling us it is a carnivore.'* (2002b, p. 143)

There are two salient, interlocking conceptions exhibited in the quotations above. One has to do with language; the other has to do with explanation. I will start with the conception of language and work towards the one of explanation.

## **A distortive picture of language (and explanation)**

In this section I confront the idea that there is something wrong (i.e. ontologically unsound) in some way or other with talking about classes, structures, capitalism, groups, society or employing a host of other expressions that are used in the description and explanation of social affairs. For given the above characterisations it seems that to speak about 'changing the economy' or someone acting in a certain way 'because they are mid-

dle class' (or e.g. to use concepts Elder-Vass (2006) lists such as discourse, the state, institutions, values, money etc.) is to speak in a special kind of way, to speak tongue-in-cheek, or to speak loosely or rhetorically. However, the fact that to speak about those things is not in any way extraordinary and that as speakers of the language we usually understand what is being said when people make use of these expressions should give us pause for thought, especially when it is claimed that these expressions are somehow inadequate. It must be remembered, if only because it is all too easily forgotten, that these expressions are not sociological inventions (see e.g. Rose 1960 for evidence that sociology is through and through dependent on common terms), that is to say *they are not technical terms*, but form part of the vernacular that (usually) both sociologists and other members of the society speak.

To state my objection bluntly, there is nothing loose about these ways of speaking, nor are they a mere *façon de parler*. They only become a *façon de parler* given a certain picture of how language relates to 'what is out there', a picture which is *foisted upon us* by the idea that we must think ontologically. If we accept that we *must* do so, then we are likely to presuppose that picture. The latter exhibits itself, for instance, in the following passage where Archer is attempting to establish ontology as an inescapable concern:

Since theories are propositions containing concepts and since all concepts have their referents (pick out features held to belong to social reality), then there can be no social theory without an accompanying social ontology (implicit or explicit). (Archer, 1995, p. 12)

Now this is strongly reminiscent, although in an oblique way, of the idea in early analytic philosophy (adhered to by Bertrand Russell and other philosophers) of a logically proper language, that is, an ideal language in which referring expressions would have a distinctive logical structure, and be meaningful by virtue of the fact that they refer to the entities that populate ultimate reality. It is clear that Archer is *not* talking about any ideal language; instead, she can only have in mind the ordinary concepts that comprise the natural language sociologists speak. But her conception of the natural language is dangerously close to Russell's idea. John Cook both illuminates and rebuts the implications for ordinary language (i.e. natural language) that the ideal of a logically proper language carries in his superb article on the fate of ordinary language philosophy. Cook dubs the misconception at work the 'picture of language as a conceptual schema'. In the following passage he sums up both the picture and its refutation:

The chief elements of that picture were these: ordinary language is a map of the ontological terrain, but whereas it ought to be a good map, philosophers have shown it to be quite a poor one, and therefore the concepts of ordinary language stand in need of correction by philosophers (and perhaps by scientists as well)

[...]

the idea that language is comprised of (or contains) concepts which embody the 'common sense view of the world' and therefore that language is an ontological map

[...]

For if Wittgenstein is right [...] then not only have philosophers not shown ordinary language to be a 'poor map of the ontological terrain, 'but they have been mistaken all along in thinking that our language is any sort of map, either a good one or a poor one, and mistaken, too, in thinking that there is an ontological terrain to be mapped. In short, our language is not a 'conceptual schema' at all. (Cook, 1980, p. 36)

The key point in the above can be brought out in the following manner: one can use language to describe what the world is like, and these descriptions can be accurate or inaccurate, true or false. But the language itself is neither of these things. Similarly, we can employ concepts to make true and false assertions and the making of both kinds of assertion presupposes the meaningfulness of our concepts. This includes assertions about the existence or the reality of something which *depend* on our concepts being meaningful,

not vice versa. Finally, this involves using language to express different beliefs, which often are conflicting or even contradictory ones, but the language itself is not a set of beliefs, ontological or of any other kind.

We can now appreciate why the fact that Cook puts together the idea that concepts embody the ‘common sense view of the world’ with the idea that language is an ontological map is a crucial step towards understanding Archer’s conception (this is Bhaskar’s conception too [see Cruickshank, 2010] and, more recently, Elder-Vass’s [2006, pp. 3-4]). The reason he does so is because under the picture of language as a ‘conceptual scheme’ the existence of a certain concept in the language is interpreted as *ipso facto* committing the speaker to the existence of an entity falling under that concept and hence entailing the ascription of a belief about existence to that person. It can then be seen how Archer’s idea originates in the same place as the philosophical idea that a logically proper language would show unequivocally what the ontological commitments of its speakers are, namely in the idea that every language comes with an ontology built into it and therefore speakers (be they sociologists or members) must have certain implicit or explicit ontological commitments. *Once language and ontology are uncoupled*, however, not only does it become possible to entertain the idea that the ontological consideration is both external to language and dispensable but one can also see the very idea of an ontology as arising out of a confusion concerning what can be said about language as opposed to what can be said about *our doings with* language. The ‘theoretical propositions’ Archer mentions in the excerpt quoted above *might* commit us to the existence of something (but we will have to look at the propositions and what a theorist might be saying to decide this), but the predominantly vernacular concepts (or second order concepts which presuppose the former) that might feature in these propositions do not commit us to anything, least of all metaphysical beliefs. Lest I be misunderstood, I am not denying that we can and do use language in referential ways. What I am denying is that 1) those referential uses are what is fundamental about language, 2) that there is or should be an ‘ontological basis’ to meaningful language use and 3) that it is sound or possible *to infer uniform referential uses from the concepts* without looking at *what is being said* with them.

Bearing this in mind, I want to return to Harré. It has hopefully been thrown into sharp relief that, instead of questioning whether we must adhere to this picture of language, Harré keeps the picture of language intact and separates the literal talk which is ontologically sound from the rhetorical talk which is a mere *façon de parler*. This is a clear indication that he does not take issue with the attitude that drives us into confusion but finds the solution instead in distinguishing between ontologically proper and improper ways of speaking. Consider, for example, what he says in the following excerpt:

‘Trying to ameliorate the quality of human life by trying to change the social structure is similarly mistaken. There is no such thing to be changed. There are widely shared discursive practices through which the social world is constituted and reconstituted each day’ (2002b, p. 145)

This passage is presumably intended to expose the reificatory impulse of the critical realists who are charged with turning social structures into concrete (and therefore manipulable?) things. This is a common intellectual trap and, indeed, it is difficult to see how one might quarrel with Harré on this point. However, it seems that, thinking in ontological mode, he wants to extract more out of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness than the latter permits.

What *can* perhaps be said is that the sense in which one *changes* discursive practices is different to the sense in which one *changes* the social structure (although in many cases changing discursive practices *is* changing the structure or might result in a changed structure) in the same way that the sense in which one *changes* a light-bulb can be said to be different to the sense in which one *changes* the light level in a room (a case in which

again the latter might result from the former or might actually *count as* the former).<sup>31</sup> Thus, when someone is tempted to confuse one use with the other (as presumably are the critical realists according to Harré's charge of reification) the appeal can be made to the way the two uses are related, in saying that one of them is e.g. literal while the other is metaphorical, a manner of speaking, or a *façon de parler*.

What cannot be concluded from this, however, is that one of these two uses is somehow ontologically superior because it is based on referring to (real?) entities whereas the other way is ontologically empty. It is one thing to point out to someone that they should not think of changing the structure as changing something additional to social practices and it is quite another to claim that '[t]o put it bluntly, in this universe, there are people performing discursive acts and there are material poles and charges. That is all' (2002b, p. 145).

This is an ultimately suspect way of accounting for the 'grammatical' facts, that is, the facts concerning the use of expressions. There is evidently room in our language and our social life for phrases such as 'changing the economic system', 'abolishing capitalism' etc.<sup>32</sup> The *reason these phrases can cause trouble* is because it is easily forgotten (especially when theorising) that we need to pay attention to *what is being said* with them. Instead of paying attention to what contrast, for instance, is marked by the insistence on changing social structures (e.g. that it is not only individual cases we need to change or, to use a relatively recent example, that it is not enough that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stepped down) the assumption is all too easily made that unless an expression names some kind of thing which is material (or occupying another ontological status – what are the options really?), it is otherwise merely rhetorical (or metaphorical), i.e. ontologically invalid.

In other words, instead of looking at terms as they enter into the doings of speakers who might be making the same point by saying either, say, 'we have to change the way the buying and selling of things takes place' or 'we have to change the economy' the way of proceeding demanded by the ontological project is that we *stare at the terms* and ask instead whether there is something real that they name and whether 'the economy' is reducible to 'the way people buy and sell things' because how can people ever say anything meaningful with those terms if they are not referring to something real? But, as we saw this is just the prejudice that the fundamental thing about language is naming entities. To use one of Edward Sapir's examples (cited in Cook, 1978) to illustrate the reasoning involved even further, it is as if someone who reported on a rock slide in a different language by using the grammatical form proper to that language, e.g. 'it stones downwards', is potentially wrong not because what they report is inaccurate but because the grammatical form they use to report it is ontologically unsound! This is as glaring a prejudice as prejudices go and one which Wittgenstein put his finger on in the following remark:

...we're tempted to say that our way of speaking does not describe the facts as they really are. As if, for example, the proposition 'he has pains' could be false in some other way than by that man's *not* hav-

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<sup>31</sup> The point I am trying to make here is equivalent to the one White (1979) makes that although shootings and killings are different kinds of things, we can and do say that *this* shooting *is* a killing.

<sup>32</sup> One might see what I am recommending, as one anonymous reviewer did, as uncritically accepting from ordinary language users what it makes sense to say, which in turn prohibits us from asking the question of causal efficacy. In my view, the issue is one of being consistent, not of being prohibited from doing something. Insofar as one employs concepts already in use and does so in their common acceptance, there are criteria of employing the concepts correctly. Imposing on concepts the idea that they must be referring to an entity is to misunderstand many kinds of concepts. Furthermore, the aforementioned condition has nothing to do with accepting anything from ordinary language users (who, let it be noted, are not a group which does not include social scientists or philosophers) in the sense of accepting a piece of ideology uncritically. It is not a matter of speaking bourgeois English, but of speaking intelligible English. Nor is it a matter of speaking ontologically unsound English, for there is no ontology or theory built into the language.

ing pains. As if the form of expression were saying something false, even when the proposition *faut de mieux* asserted something true' (2009, §402).<sup>33</sup>

It is the pursuit of an ontology which fuels these misconceptions, based as it is on the indiscriminate employment of the word 'entity' as one of the recognizably ontological ways of speaking ('object' is used in the same way as is the 'is it real?' question). In other words, to do ontology is to speak about what exists and what exists are 'entities'. However, this simplified scheme does not quite fit the uses of the word 'entity' which therefore ends up generating a criterion of what it means to exist and be real that is modelled on physical things. Moreover, the supposition is made that there are material things and there are other kinds of things, where those other things are still understood to be like material things in most ways (apart from the fact that they are somehow not material). Hence, these other 'entities' end up as mysterious ones! To give one example from the philosophical disputes on *mind*, a lot of confusion has been generated by the implicit reasoning that because 'body' may be used to refer to a material thing, we must conclude that 'mind' (by virtue of being a noun) must also refer to a thing which is either 1) the brain, 2) non-material and therefore some other immaterial entity or 3) because it does not refer to something material it does not exist and therefore only brains exist. Once we have exposed the idea that 'all concepts have their referents' or that all expressions must refer to entities as a misconception, however, these options cease to be seen as the only ones available. The possibility opens up then that 'the mind' does not refer to an entity but is a concept used to talk about the abilities of individuals.

Based on the above, then, it can be seen that Harré's way of confronting the critical realists by asking whether X is a) causally efficacious and therefore b) real and (as we will shortly see) c) capable of explaining, in order to establish whether it should be admitted into our ontology, on which, in turn, hangs the question of whether it makes sense to want to change social structures, is equally misconceived as thinking that to change social structures is to change something out there hovering over our heads (a mistake of the kind Harré attributes to the critical realists). Moreover, Harré's conclusion to the effect that only persons are causally efficacious cannot be seen as a profound discovery that forms the basis of a parsimonious ontology. Instead, it could be acknowledged as a 'grammatical remark' and therefore be treated as a *reminder* about what (and how) it makes sense to say. In other words, it is best seen as a logical and not an ontological point<sup>34</sup> (in anything more than a trivial sense) and, consequently, is to be purged of any purportedly metaphysical significance.

Divested of any purportedly ontological implications, perhaps Harré's critique of the critical realists could be summed up in the following way: 'What you are doing is incompatible with my theory of causal powers which you frequently invoke; scientific causal concepts cannot apply to what is not a powerful particular'. Still, such a response would fail to take into account that we can and do use causal concepts in connection with social structure expressions. The point is not to judge these uses by appealing to causal concepts as employed in the physical sciences, but to get them right in the first place. Does it not make sense to say that capitalism *causes* people who run businesses to either become competitive in the market or perish? Does capitalism cause people in the same way that one billiard ball causes another to move? And if that is not the case, does

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<sup>33</sup> Although Harré says in concluding his rejoinder to Carter and Strydom that '[t]here is a vocabulary of social structure words. Our problem must be to try to find out what they could possibly mean' (2002b, p. 147) he does not see this direction as an eradication of the preoccupation with entities and referents.

<sup>34</sup> On rejecting the ontological conception of logic see e.g. Putnam (1994, p. 247).

that mean that the former way of speaking is rhetorical or somehow loose because it is not covered by the concept of cause as it applies to the powers of particulars?

To complete the complex picture at work, I briefly sketch the conception of explanation evinced in the quotations provided at the end of the previous section. This will hopefully throw some light on how the outlawing of certain forms of expression on grounds of causal efficacy (a move which may be misleadingly presented in the form of not admitting entities into our ontology) is supported by the idea that locating causal efficacy is the only proper form of explanation. Thus, causal efficacy, reality and explanation are made to fit together.

Consider, for instance, the claim by Harré that in the same way that the beneficial effects of red wine on the human heart are explained by biochemists locating efficacy in molecules, whose behaviour, in turn, is explained by physical chemists ‘relocating the efficacy in electrons’ (2002b, p. 144):

We say that universal suffrage improved the condition of the working class. Social constructionists relocate the efficacy of the social fact in the changed pattern of discursive acts through which the everyday life of working people is constituted. The final step is to relocate the efficacy of acts in the people who perform them. There is no efficacy in the structures themselves. (2002b, p. 144)

The above exhibits rather nicely Harré’s position which was based from its inception (Harré, 1970) on an attack on the positivist conception of scientific explanation which regarded the latter as a matter of establishing nomic relations between events. Instead, Harré, emphasised the central role mechanisms play in accounting for the relations between events and hence identified causal mechanisms as the proper object of scientific understanding and as what holds a properly explanatory role. In one sense this was a welcome advance in the philosophical understanding of what science is about. However, in another sense this conception remains just as rigid and stipulative as the one it sought to correct. Both Harré *and* the critical realists have substituted equally monolithic conceptions of explanation for the one the logical positivists held before them, thus denying the polymorphic character of explanation as a human action. As a result, *the only legitimate form of question* which requires explanation is thought to be ‘what (or who) caused X?’.

## Conclusion

In this article I have taken a first step towards discrediting the recent preoccupation with ontological matters in social thought. I have tried to exploit some Wittgensteinian elements, which are invoked but not given due weight in Harré’s argument (2002a, 2002b), in order to suggest that the ontological project is confused and to identify one of the sources of confusion in a distortive picture of language and explanation.

One moral to be drawn is that it is well worth thinking twice about whether casting the issues that divide opposing sociological schools in terms of ontology does anything to help make their differences clearer. The reason is that it transposes the disagreement to a plateau of confusion mostly generated by the preoccupation with ‘entities’ and ‘referents’. Stripped of the ontological concern it is perhaps worth asking whether Critical Realists or Social Constructionists really mean to regard as contentious whether it can make sense to want to change social structures and whether we can understand what one might be saying by this statement, unless that is we stipulate that ‘social structures’ is

somehow an ontologically unacceptable expression.<sup>35</sup> And if ontological talk is a prerequisite of grandiloquent disagreement then perhaps the disagreement is a product of the transposition. Perhaps, it is more useful to think of the disagreement as methodological as Button and Sharrock suggest (2010, p. 33). Doing so further points us in the direction of giving up the idea that one requires an ontology on which to ground one's methodology and empirical investigations. At this point I have only attempted to *shift the burden of proof* concerning such a conception by questioning its perceived inescapability.

In conclusion, I will try to make perspicuous one final time a fundamental distinction, namely the one between ontological and logical (or conceptual) investigations, albeit in a slightly different way and by using another piece of reasoning, which will help us appreciate the pervasive nature of the conflation. If the exemplary ontological questions whether social structures are real or whether they exist are not questions about the existence of an entity but about *in what sense* something can be said to be real or to exist (Sharrock, 1987) then the ontology (i.e., the picture of 'entities' and 'referents') drops out. To witness the transition, consider an excerpt from Richard Jenkins' recent polemical piece on the sociological uses of the notion of structure, where he attempts to provide a rationale for ascribing a different ontological status to collectivities as opposed to individuals. He begins by going down the familiar material/immaterial path, at some point, however, he claims that: 'Collectivities have a distinctive ontological status: they do not exist in the same way that individual humans *can be said* to exist' (2010, p. 147).<sup>36</sup> Here Jenkins is unknowingly giving the game away, for the question has now become a matter of settling *the sense* in which collectivities can be said to exist, a question not about whether there is some entity out there, but about the logical behaviour of 'collectivities' and 'exist', which, given that 'exist', like 'real', clamours for an opposing term (Austin, 1962), can be adequately addressed by specifying what their existence is being contrasted to. Equally, the question 'in what sense are social structures real?' is not a question about their ontological status any more than the question about the sense in which a bargain is a real bargain is a question about which ontological domain real bargains occupy.

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<sup>35</sup> Such a move would be doubly dubious for the additional reason that 'social structure' is used as a formal concept to collect kinds of expressions, which means that its being said to be ontologically unsound is even more obscure a claim.

<sup>36</sup> What immediately precedes this quotation (beginning with a question I have argued we *have no reason to ask*) reads as follows: 'We need to ask, with appropriately authentic naïveté, 'What *are* collectivities?' Once we take this question seriously, the problem becomes clear. In our everyday lives we participate in a world populated by embodied individuals, who are tangible, three-dimensional, distinct from each other, and very material. They possess agency, they act. Collectivities, by contrast, are less visible or tangible – certainly visible and tangible in different ways – and they do not 'act', other than in the actions of their members.' (Jenkins, 2010, p. 147)

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<sup>37</sup> The reference section in this draft is not complete.



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