Deflationary Social Ontology Is Not So Easy

Pete Faulconbridge

Section 1

The starting point for my paper today is an argument which can be found in some work by the anthropologist Dan Sperber. Sperber tells us that the Ebelo take marriage to be a union blessed by the ancestors, and that many French people think that it is a sacrament sanctioned by the Christian god (1996 22-23). And Sperber takes this as a reason for denying that marriage – or at least Ebelo marriage and French Christian marriage – really exists.

I had been planning to try to show how this argument might be understood more formally, and then to discuss it in the context of Thomasson's easy approach to ontology.

However, I have ultimately decided not to do this. One reason is that I realised that the substantive points I wanted to make do not really make use of this meta-ontological framework. The other is that a proper reconstruction of Sperber's argument seems to raise a number of tricky questions in semantics, and perhaps in meta-semantics, and to be honest I just haven't been able to settle on a satisfactory reconstruction yet.

As I will outline, I am going to focus mainly on how people have thought about claims like Sperber's first premise and his conclusion in recent anthropology. To say what I want to say I think that it's better for now to stick to a fairly intuitive way of understanding these claims. However, I would be very interested to hear suggestions on whether and how Sperber's argument might relate to some of the other topics we've heard about during this conference.

There are just two things that I want to briefly mention about the basic argument though, before moving on. First is that it bears an interesting superficial resemblance to some of the arguments which Thomasson suggests the easy ontologist might make about the non-existence of things like dragons and witches.

Despite this resemblance, I think that Sperber's argument is intuitively much less compelling than Thomasson's argument against dragons. And the key difference I think is that Sperber is speaking as an anthropologist. Hence his premise concerns not his own use of the word 'marriage', but instead concerns how 'other people', be they Ebelo or Christian, understand and use their term for marriage. His argument therefore raises the question of how anthropologists' use of a term for a social kind ought to be guided by the use of terms for that kind in the culture that she is describing. Sperber's argument seems to rest at least partly on an attempt to refuse to negotiate the meaning of the term 'marriage' with the people he is describing, and

this is one of the things that marks him off from many philosophers who discuss social ontology. As we have seen in a number of the talks so far, many philosophers, particularly those working in feminist social ontology and other explicitly political enterprises, are often overtly engaged in negotiation about the use of their key terms. And I think it's also very plausible that many social ontologists who would think of themselves as engaged in merely descriptive work are also covertly engaged in meta-semantic negotiations of various sorts.

However, as I have said I will not try to rely on any of this material in what follows. Instead, I will first discuss Sperber's premise and conclusion in fairly intuitive terms in light of recent work in anthropology. Then, at the end, I will raise a question of whether parts of Thomasson's positive account of social ontology from her 2003 papers on the topic can be reconciled with some of the anthropological approaches to ontology that I will describe.

[8:00]

Section 2: What are the ontological commitments of ordinary social kind concepts?

So Sperber pointed out that many people understand marriage to involve a role for deities or deceased ancestors. And he suggests that the same will hold for the way people understand many other social phenomena, too. In this section I am going to assess this premise, in relation to social kinds like marriage, contract, and money. I will focus on these examples of what Thomasson has called 'conceptually transparent' social kinds, partly because they are what Sperber talks most about, and partly because this will allow me to connect the results of this section and the next to Thomasson's positive account of social ontology at the end.

To anticipate my conclusion, I will end up basically agreeing with Sperber that people often understand things like marriage and contract as involving a role for what we might think of as 'supernatural' entities like deities or deceased ancestors. I think that in many ways this is also the *intuitive* interpretation of some familiar ethnographic observations. But I am going to outline some reasons why I think we should nevertheless be *cautious* about endorsing specific claims like P1, and why it is well worth paying attention to the details of anthropological discussions of ontological commitment.

It is worth noting here that there have in the past been strong tendencies within anthropology to interpret many apparently extravagant ontological claims as really not undertaking any significant ontological commitments at all. For example, when a group of people say of themselves, "We are parrots", or "the forest is a parent to us", anthropologists have often been tempted to interpret this utterance in a broadly expressivist or symbolic way, and not as a literal assertion carrying ontological import.

However, whilst expressivist or symbolic interpretations might sometimes be appropriate, It seems to me that a lot of recent work in anthropology has moved away from this style of interpretation. There seems to be a much greater tendency to try to take people at their word, when they make statements which appear to carry ontological import.

However, this is not to say that we can easily tell exactly *what* people are committed to, especially when they are speaking from a culture different to our own. In particular, there are two quite general errors which anthropologists have often fallen into, and which it seems philosophers would do well to learn from.

The first is that certain features of our own intellectual history often dispose us to interpret other people's beliefs as more metaphysically loaded than they really are. Consider the concept of 'animism' in the history of anthropology. Animism has often been described as "the belief that inside ordinary visible, tangible bodies there is [a] normally invisible, normally intangible being: the soul" (Harris 1983 186; qtd. Bird-David 1999 67). Animist beliefs are supposed to be manifested in activities like nurturing 'social' relations with entities like rocks and plants, and in remarks such as 'the forest is a parent to us'.

It has been pointed out that many anthropologists historically interpreted animism in light of their own, broadly Cartesian, understanding of what intelligent life and social relations are like. Caricaturing a little, we might say that historically animism was interpreted as a view which held that rocks and trees contain something like Cartesian egos. Given this interpretation, animism is liable to appear, by the lights of Western science, obviously false. However, it has also been pointed out more recently that people who have been labelled as animists do not understand intelligence or social life in terms of Cartesian egos, and that accordingly we should revise our understanding of the metaphysical commitments of their beliefs and practices (e.g. Bird-David 1999).

More generally, the tendency to think of religion in pervasively metaphysical terms appears to be specific to particular cultural and historical locations. We might recall here that it was only during the Early Modern period that marriage became strongly claimed as a sacrament by the Church in Europe (Muir 2005 37). Although Christians in Europe might have talked of god in connection with marriage before this time, it may have been much easier before the Early Modern period for them to see marriage as an essentially social, rather than a spiritual institution. When we find this kind of pattern of historical development, it might be particularly tempting to think of belief in the essential role of a deity in marriage as a mere 'tacked on' commitment.

The second general point to highlight is that we are often tempted to think that apparently dominant cultural beliefs are held much more universally and uncritically than they are, especially when we are interpreting 'other' cultures than our own. Related to this is a tendency to take the kinds of explicit ontological statements often made in formal ritual contexts as authoritative guides to local understanding, rather than as simply one element of a complex practice.

These two considerations remind us of the difficulty of understanding what another person – let alone another 'culture' – is really committed to. So they give us reasons for caution in our interpretations. But do they imply that we should entirely renounce the sorts of interpretations that Sperber gives of Christian and Ebelo understandings of marriage? I think that would be too hasty.

I will now briefly outline two recent pieces of work in anthropology which pay explicit attention to the ambivalence and scepticism which can be found in people's attitudes towards apparently dominant beliefs. However, I will suggest that even in these nuanced discussions, we still find evidence for the claim that people often understand things like marriage or contracts as involving a role for things like deities or magical powers, understood in an ontologically robust sense.

First let's consider David Graeber's work on social creativity. Graeber describes a variety of contexts where magical practices are a common part of everyday life. But he also tells us that people in these contexts often express scepticism about the authenticity of magic (Graeber 2001 242ff.). He says that although they have been downplayed in many ethnographies, expressions of scepticism are in fact *widespread*, with people regularly saying that this or that practitioner is a fraud, and that their apparently magical results are simply the product of trickery or persuasion.

However, this scepticism is not the whole picture. Graeber describes how many conversations about magic would begin with his interlocutor asserting that magical powers exist, before qualifying this with reference to imposters etc. And many moved in the opposite direction, beginning with the assertion that magic is "purely social in nature" before claiming that nevertheless *some* magic seems not to be explicable by reference to persuasion or other social phenomena (Graeber 2015 13). Graeber therefore understands expressions of scepticism as one part of a deep *ambivalence* regarding the status of magic.

Graeber then also suggests that we often find just the same kind of ambivalence regarding things that philosophers are inclined to think of as *real* social phenomena, such as contracts, money, social relationships, and political power. For example, many people believe that when two parties create a contract by swearing on an object, they thereby bring it about that they are liable to be punished by the spirit of that object if they break the contract – although, as before, this belief will often be held with some ambivalence (2005 430). (I note in passing that a similar ambivalence in fact pervades many philosophical discussions of promising and contract.)

What is the significance of this ambivalence? One interpretation might have it that the expressions of scepticism represent people's *true* opinions, and that their statements of the reality of non-social magical powers are merely a nod to the party line. However, Graeber's own interpretation speaks against this. He suggests that many of the practices associated with our 'real' social kinds like marriage and contract depend fundamentally on participants thinking, at least some of the time, that there is something more going on – some power that does not rest simply on persuasion and agreement.

I will return to Graeber, and his own views about ontology, below. First I want to mention another recent piece of work in anthropology.

Rita Astuti is an anthropologist who has done fieldwork among the Vezo in Madagascar. She describes how the Vezo spend time and money making offerings to their deceased ancestors, in order to avoid the misfortunes which a dissatisfied ancestor can cause.

Astuti then suggests that a standard anthropological interpretation of these practices might conclude the following,

> Vezo believe that a deceased person's *angatse* continues to want, to feel cold, hungry, lonely or outright angry, and continues to monitor, judge and influence living people – in other words, that some of the person's sensory, cognitive and emotional […] faculties survive after death. (Astuti 'Ancestors and the Afterlife' 64)

However, whilst she does not dismiss this interpretation, she seeks to complicate the question of 'what the Vezo believe', by employing experimental paradigms from cognitive science and developmental psychology.

The experimenter provides subjects with a vignette about a man who goes to hospital and dies. They then ask subjects whether this man would now be able to do a number of things, where these are grouped (nb. by Astuti) into 'bodily processes' ("Does his heart beat?", "Does his stomach need food?") and 'mental processes' ("Does he hear people talk?", "Does he miss his children?") (Astuti 'A&A' 66, n.4).

The main results were as follows:

- Many people gave answers which implied that mental processes could continue after death.
- Some people gave answers implying that bodily process can continue after death.
- But some people also gave answers which implied that *no* mental or bodily processes continue after death.

The first two results are compatible with the standard anthropological interpretation, according to which the Vezo believe in an afterlife. But the third result challenges this interpretation. However, Astuti also found that the view that death is the end of everything was highly sensitive to context. When the vignette focused on the man's body in the hospital, just under half of her subjects gave answers implying that no life processes continue after death. But the experiment was also run with a vignette which highlighted a ritual context, by describing the dead man as being 'over at the tombs'. In this condition, 87% of subjects gave answers implying that at least some mental processes continue after death (Astuti A&A 68).

Astuti's results therefore suggest that individual belief in the afterlives of ancestors is not unanimous, and is also highly sensitive to context. These results should give us some pause for thought about what she describes as the standard anthropological

interpretation of cultural beliefs. However, despite this, her experiment still provides evidence of significant, widespread commitment to the existence of an afterlife. That is to say that somewhere between 57% and 87% of the Vezo seem to think, at any given point, that when they are talking about dead ancestors, they are talking about beings which can see, hear, feel cold, or remember things.

Moreover, these beliefs appear to be particularly salient in ritual contexts, and so if the Vezo were to say e.g. that marriage is a union blessed by the ancestors, it would appear quite likely that they were thinking of ancestors in this metaphysically robust way. (I have not been able to learn much about Vezo understandings of marriage so far, however, so this suggestion should just be taken as illustrative. [//don't mention connection with Ebelo.]) All of this is *despite* the fact that Astuti takes her results to show that what we might think of as a secularised concept of death has a firm presence in Vezo thought.

This discussion of Graeber and Astuti does not allow us to make any confident generalisations. But I hope that it is enough to support the idea that Sperber's basic premise is plausible, even when we pay greater attention to the nuance and ambivalence which characterise many people's views of social and religious entities. Putting it a bit too bluntly, the idea is that local concepts for social kinds can often come with significant ontological commitments to the existence of non-social kinds. To qualify that statement a bit, though, we should understand 'social' and 'non-social' here in terms of the way that things are usually categorised in analytic philosophy. I don't want to presume that we can actually tell in advance of substantive enquiry whether a given kind is social or not, or whether it is real or not. One final qualification is that although most of the examples we have encountered here have been from Madagascar, I think that the *sorts* of commitments we have been considering here are likely to be found all over, including in the private lives of many philosophers. And I don't think that these commitments are only found in religious contexts, either.

We saw at the beginning that this claim about how people understand social kinds is a key premise in Sperber's argument for his own eliminativist conclusion. But his conclusion appears to be much more controversial than his premise, within anthropology. I will briefly outline some alternatives, before returning to philosophical social ontology, in the context of Thomasson's work.

[20:00]

Section 3: Ontological commitments in recent anthropology

We saw at the beginning of this paper that Sperber's argument seemed to presuppose that the anthropologist's use of terms like 'marriage' should adopt the same ontological commitments as it has in the local culture they are describing. But since Sperber himself thinks that there are no deities or ancestors, he concludes that Christian or Ebelo marriage do not exist as real entities in the world.

Now, strictly speaking this is not an accurate construal of his position. Sperber's claim is actually that *if* anthropologists used terms like 'marriage' in an ontologically committal way, *then* their own commitments should reflect those of the people whose practices they are describing. However, Sperber puts forward an alternative interpretation of anthropological discourse according to which when an anthropologist uses a term like 'marriage', she is not trying to refer to anything at all, but is instead using the term to provide an interpretation of local beliefs and practices.

Sperber puts this his non-referential interpretation forward as a *descriptive* hypothesis concerning the nature of anthropological discourse, with the hope of saving hard-won anthropological expertise from his eliminativism about almost all social kinds. To be honest, I find it quite difficult to understand Sperber's account of the supposedly non-referential, interpretive use of anthropological terms, but it seems very unlikely to me that it is an accurate descriptive account of actual use. However, it would be interesting to think about his proposal as more explicitly suggesting a revision of anthropological practice, and I wonder whether that might lead to a more straightforward account of the interpretive discourse which he advocates.

The first alternative to Sperber could be understood as agreeing with him that anthropological uses of a social kind term should be guided by the same ontological commitments as those it has in the local culture being described. However, this alternative makes it a methodological principle to *affirm* local ontologies. So, faced with the claim that there are marriages, and that marriage is a union blessed by the deity, they will affirm that *both* marriages *and* deities exist.

This practice of affirming local ontologies is associated with what has been called the 'Ontological Turn' in recent anthropology. An important feature of this Turn is that it rejects Sperber's confidence that things like deities do not exist, and it also rejects attempts to paraphrase local ontological commitments away as merely metaphorical, expressive, or symbolic. Instead, it seeks to affirm local ontological claims as literally true. This means accepting that we might not understand what it is that other people are talking about. If we understood them properly, we would see that they are speaking truly of the world they live in (Henare et al. 13).

I should say that the main proponents of the Ontological Turn would likely reject the terms in which I have spelled out the issues here. Conversely, I find it quite difficult to imagine that many analytic philosophers would accept the meta-ontological arguments provided by the proponents of the OT. But I think that regardless of the more meta point, the work coming out of the Ontological Turn presents us with an interesting challenge. Going back to the theme of conceptual engineering, the Ontological Turners are explicitly committed to reforming anthropological practice, and they often cite political goals – such as "the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples" – as a motivation for this reform. Even if we don't accept their arguments, it nevertheless seems to be the case that they *have* begun to develop a

rich ethnographic practice around their methodological precept of accepting local ontologies.

So we might reject their own interpretation of what they are up to, but their ethnographic work would still present *us* with the challenge of saying what they *are* up to. How should we understand the language game which they have developed?

Unfortunately, I can't go into it further here. But I hope that the contrast with the Sperber approach is clear enough, from what I've said.

I will now outline a third and final approach to ontology within anthropology, which also contrasts with Sperber's, but which is in many ways more traditional than the Ontological Turn.

In essence, this third approach says that we can be realists about things like Christian or Ebelo marriage, without ourselves being committed to the existence of gods or ancestors, because the anthropological use of terms like 'marriage' does not need to take on the ontological commitments that it has in the local culture being described.

For an illustration we can return to David Graeber's work. We saw earlier that he describes a magical object which is used in Madagascar to make contracts. People use it as something to swear on, somewhat in the way that a person might swear on a bible, or sign their name on a paper contract. They also think – albeit in the ambivalent way that Graeber describes – that this object has the power to inflict physical harm on people who break their agreements. Graeber himself is inclined to think that swearing on these objects *can* create a contract, although he is sceptical of the idea that the objects are capable of taking revenge on people who break them (2005 430; 2015 35).

This approach suggests that we can reject Sperber's argument. That is, we can grant that, say, some Christians believe that marriage requires being blessed by God, whilst still saying that their term for marriage refers to a real social kind. (And we can do this without committing ourselves to the existence of any deity.)

There is one further point which we should notice about these examples. When *we* talk about marriages and contracts, we are talking about things which exist only if the parties involved think that they exist. This fact speaks strongly against saying that the anthropologist is simply talking about something completely different to what her informant is talking about. We might compare this to the way in which a natural law theorist and a legal realist could refer to the same thing by 'contract', even though they disagree on what is really required for there to be a contract. (Although this analogy is not perfect.)

There is of course much more that could be said here. [Lots of semantic issues, and the question of whether we should understand my talk of 'ontological commitment' in terms of anything like 'application conditions', or not.] But the key idea is that it is possible to coherently maintain the following:

X is a kind of entity which is created through social practices in some cultural context, where the local term 'X' refers to *X*, even though 'X' is associated locally with ontological commitments which are not in fact fulfilled.

Of course, the question of *which* terms should be understood in this way is a substantive one which may require significant work in the social and natural sciences. I have spoken about deities here, because I am discussing Sperber's example, but of course if you believe in a deity then your view of this example will be quite different. Graeber himself stresses that the kind of realism he advocates should encourage us to turn a critical attitude towards our own social practices, and to be open to learning from other cultures about what really exists in the social and natural world. And indeed this is something he seeks to do, when he claims that the understanding of political power found in parts of Madagascar provides insights which traditional European concepts tend to obscure.

The central point is rather that this appears to be a coherent attitude to maintain towards some kinds *X*. Furthermore, I suggest that this attitude is quite commonly adopted not only in anthropology, but also by ordinary people with respect to many of the terms used by people from other cultures than their own.

But this position has been outlined in purely intuitive terms. How should we make sense of this sort of attitude, within a positive philosophical account of social ontology?

[27:00]

Section 4: Thomasson's positive social ontolog(y/ies)

What we have taken from the preceding discussions is the idea that there can be real social entities which are – for want of a better term – significantly mystified in the eyes of the people to whom they belong. Both Sperber and the Ontological Turn folks seem to deny this possibility, in different ways, at least for certain cases. But in Graeber the possibility of social kinds which depend on our thought about them, but about whose nature we can be substantively mistaken, emerges as a real and important possibility. Whether any given example falls into this category will be a substantive question. But I am now going to consider how we might fit this *sort* of case into our positive account of social ontology in general.

The possibility of various kinds of mystification, which might be uncovered by social science or by other forms of enquiry, is a prominent theme in Thomasson's work. For example, she writes:

> There is […] room for critique of elements of a society's metaphysical understanding of its own institutions, e.g. in exposing the beliefs of a society that believes that its institutions (kinds, laws, customs) are established through natural or supernatural powers rather than simply through collective acceptance. ('Realism and Human Kinds' 606-607)

However, despite this and similar remarks, I will argue that in Thomassons's positive account of social ontology appears to contain a commitment which makes trouble for the idea that there could be social kinds which are mystified in the way suggested in the previous section. However, I am not sure whether everyone will be familiar with this work, so I will start by providing a brief outline of one of the central elements of Thomasson's positive account of social ontology, which appears to run throughout her work.

One of the key building blocks of Thomasson's positive account of social ontology is the collective acceptance of constitutive rules. This emerges through her insightful critique and extension of Searle's use of these two concepts. The basic idea is that we can create a new social (or 'institutional') kind by collectively agreeing that if certain conditions are fulfilled, then there exists an entity of that kind.

A key example is money. Although the true details are quite complex, the idea is that what turns the pieces of metal and paper in our pockets into money is the fact that we all agree that they are money. In Searle's terms, we have 'collectively accepted' a 'constitutive rule' to the effect that anything which fulfils a given set of conditions 'counts as' money. Thomasson's 'Foundations for a Social Ontology' accepts this terminology, but points out that we need to pay much more attention to the various forms that constitutive rules take, and to how this affects the nature of the entities which they generate.

So that's the basic idea behind talk of 'the collective acceptance of constitutive rules'. But as I have suggested, I think that this framework get deployed in a way which makes trouble for the possibility of the kind of mystification concerning social entities which we outlined in Section 3.

Accounting for mystified social kinds which are generated through the collective acceptance of constitutive rules requires us to make a clear distinction between the content of the constitutive rules themselves, and the application conditions governing our *own* use of a term for the social kind which is being constructed. In *Ontology Made Easy* it is not always obvious that this distinction is being made in the discussion of institutional kinds, although I am not confident that I am reading the relevant passages correctly. Possibly this has something to do with the confusion about truthmakers which was mentioned in the Q&A earlier… Perhaps this would suggest a more Anscombean than a Searlean approach to constitutive rules…

But regardless of how it works out in *Ontology Made Easy*, we do see this distinction being made clearly in some of Thomasson's earlier papers on social ontology, in particular 'Realism and Human Kinds', and 'Foundations for a social ontology'

For example, in 'Realism and Human Kinds', Thomasson sketches the following principle, which spells out how concrete institutional kinds can depend on collective acceptance:

DP1: Necessarily, for all x, x is K if and only if there is a set C of conditions such that it is collectively accepted that (for all y, if y meets all conditions in C, then y is K), and x meets all conditions in C. (R&HK 587)

We might think of DP1 as specifying (part of) the application conditions for an institutional term like 'marriage' in the language of the anthropologist. This principle *does* allow us to distinguish between collectively accepted constitutive rules and application conditions, although it also allows that their contents *may* coincide.

DP1 therefore allows us to say that people might be unaware of some of the true conditions for the existence of their social kinds. For example, Thomasson points out that DP1 makes room for people to be ignorant of DP1 itself, for some of their social kinds K (R&HK 590).

We can see that if people *are* unaware of DP1, then this allows room for them to be *mistaken* about what makes it the case that things satisfying conditions C count as members of kind K. For example, they might think that saying the right words counts as getting married because it has been divinely legislated that this is how you get married. Whereas in fact, according to Thomasson, it is collective agreement that means saying these words counts as getting married. This opens up some space for the demystifying role of social science which we saw Thomasson describing above.

So far, so good. But I now want to point out that actually this seems to be the *limit* of the kind of mystification that DP1 allows for. We can see this by considering the content of the principle. DP1 mentions just two necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of kind K. One is that people collectively accept that fulfilling conditions C is sufficient for there to be Ks, and the other is that conditions C are actually fulfilled. But what this means is that the *only* necessary condition for the existence of Ks that people could be ignorant of is the role of collective acceptance itself. There simply are no other conditions which might fall outside of C.

The upshot is that DP1 does not allow for people to be collectively mistaken about any of the *substantive* conditions for the existence of their social kinds. But in Graeber's account of creating a contract by swearing on a magical object this kind of substantive mistake *was* possible. So DP1 cannot account for all of the kinds of mystification and demystification that we described in the previous section.

Now, if I understand her correctly, then this last claim is something that Thomasson herself would agree with. That is because a key claim in her paper 'Foundations for a social ontology', which was published at the same time as 'Realism and Human Kinds', is that in order to make room for all of the kinds of discovery found in the social sciences, we need to acknowledge that there are social kinds which do not depend directly on collectively accepted constitutive rules, in the way described by principles like DP1.

These other social kinds – recessions are given as a key example – are labelled 'conceptually opaque', meaning that they do not depend for their existence on our

thinking about them as such. Because they do not depend intimately on our thought about them, it is possible to be wrong in all sorts of ways about the nature and existence of conceptually opaque kinds. As is evidenced in the case of recessions by the fact that they occurred for many years before anyone even came up with a concept of them.

Thomasson's discussion of conceptually opaque kinds is very important, particularly in relation to her critique of Searle. However, it does not quite solve the problem posed by our current examples.

The basic reason for this is that many of the social kinds which we have been discussing – such as contracts or marriages – are not conceptually opaque. They *do* seem to depend on people locally having a concept of them. The idea was that *despite* the fact that they depend on our thinking about them as such – that is, despite the fact that they are 'conceptually transparent' – it nevertheless seems that we can be substantively mistaken about their nature. So although Thomasson allows that we can be mistaken in all sorts of ways about conceptually opaque kinds, this does not help us make sense of the possibility of substantive mistakes about conceptually transparent kinds.

Given this, the *problem* that I want to flag is that in these papers on social ontology, Thomasson seems to imply that all conceptually *transparent* kinds are constructed through collective acceptance of constitutive rules, according to principles like DP1. But given that the conceptually opaque and the conceptually transparent constitute a mutually exclusive and exhaustive dichotomy, this appears to leave nowhere that we can accommodate the substantially mystified but conceptually transparent social kinds which we found in our discussion of Graeber's work in Section 3.

So, to sum up this problem, the issue is not with DP1 as such. Rather, the problem comes from the suggestion that any social kind which does not depend on a principle like DP1 must be conceptually opaque. An account which adopts that commitment will not have room for our substantially mystified but conceptually transparent kinds.

I would be very interested to hear whether this dichotomy accurately reflects your view or not. As I mentioned it does seem to me to be suggested, but I vacillate over whether it is a real or deep commitment, or not. I do think that we find suggestions of this dichotomy elsewhere in the literature, though.

It remains possible to undo this dichotomy, if do we wish to make room for these kinds of cases. The most direct way to undo the dichotomy would be to unpick the various complex threads which are built into the notion of 'collective acceptance' in much work on social ontology. This might involve questioning the idea that we are in a privileged epistemic position with respect to our own collectively accepted rules. Or it might involve giving up the idea that collective acceptance is key to the construction of conceptually transparent social kinds. I suspect that much of the anthropological work we have touched on here points in the latter directions, but this claim will have to wait for another time.

So, to very briefly sum up this final section: it looks as though there is a tension between the cases we described in Section 3 and a commitment which may be present in Thomasson's work. This is the idea that conceptually transparent kinds are constructed via constitutive rules, in the sort of way described by principles like DP1.

[40:20]

~~

Passages for 'conflation'

But it is part and parcel of the easy ontological view that the uncontroversial claim that expresses the real content of the claim trivially or analytically entails the derived claim (the literal content). The rules are supposed to reflect rules of use that could be used to *introduce* the new terms to our vocabulary, just as legal definitions may introduce technical terms for (legal) marriage. According to the easy ontologist, these rules make the move from the uncontroversial claim to the derived claim truly trivial. If that is the case, then a speaker who is committed to the uncontroversial claim (the real content) is thereby committed to the derived claim (and to the ontological claim that follows from it)—even if she does not yet possess the new terms and concepts employed in the derived claim. (OME 191)

Similarly, on the easy ontological view the idea that principles such as: 'if an individual x is P, then there is some property P possessed by x' merely generate *make-believe* truths (that it is true in the property-fiction that there is some property), makes no more sense than the idea that the laws for marriage in the state of California only make it *make-believedly* the case that we are married, or even that the principle: 'if there is a man and he is unmarried, then he is a bachelor' just tells us when to *make-believe* that there are bachelors. In short, if (as the easy ontologist insists) these do reflect rules of use for the terms in question, then no sense can be made of the suggestion that the ontological claims we get as output from rules are merely pretending—while we are committed only to the 'real content' expressed in the uncontroversial claim. if the rules reflect genuine rules of use for our terms (specifying sufficient conditions for the term 'number', 'marriage', or 'property' to apply) then *nothing more is required* for the ontological claim (the literal content) to really be true than for the uncontroversial claim (real content) to be true, and so in committing herself to the 'real content' of the claim a speaker also commits herself to the truth of the ontological claim—in the only sense it has […]. (OME 192)

- It seems to me that there's a strong suggestion here that we are not just seeing an analogy between the rules of use for a term and the laws which define a social entity into existence. It seems instead in this passage at least as though we are seeing the argument for the existence of marriages (appealing to the *laws*, rather than the application conditions) as *itself* a form of easy argument. But this would imply that laws and application conditions are one and the same, in the case of marriage etc.
- One possible critique of the first horn of my dilemma might be something like this. "Well, the conditions for there to be a marriage surely involve people

thinking that they're getting married, so these conditions couldn't be satisfied in a world without the concept." I need to think this through. It's much less plausible for kinds that aren't token transparent in the way that marriage is. But I think we could also re-work it like this: imagine that the laws or the collectively accepted principles change, but the couple and the priest or whatever are unaware. They could go through a procedure that's just like the one that's sufficient in *our* world, *and they would think they were marrying*, but they wouldn't be. Because what seems to matter are the *actually* accepted constitutive rules at a world. So this isn't as stark as the world without the concept, but it's just as problematic to say that they do get married in that world, given the thought that it's actually accepted rules that matter. (Again, unless you re-interpret things like 'witnessing' so that it only happens if it's done in accordance with the actual rules. But again this seems to cause trouble if at *some* point we are supposed to be able to step into institutional discourse via trivial inferences from mundane social facts. Right? idk it's explicit in Searle but I'm less confident that it's something AT is committed to, though quite a bit of the EO stuff seems to suggest it?)

Passages for 'dichotomy'

The concepts discussed so far have been mainly those that *participants* in a social world use in constructin (conceptually transparent) entities in their own society; as a result the participants must have some knowledge of the existence of ature of the constructed objects or kinds. But things are quite different for social concepts defined 'from the outside' by those reflecting on or analyzing social practices, beliefs, and institutions. These are conceptually opaque: they may require the existence of certain forms of collective intentionality for the existence of members of the kind, without requiring any sort of collective belief or agreement *about things of that kind*. ('Foundations' 287)

the anthropologist should take seriously the concepts and theories embodied in the ethnographic data, as concepts to think with and use in ethnographic analysis, rather than supposing that we already have all the concepts we need, because we already know all the kinds of stuff of which social reality might be composed […] We should be open to the possibility that what we learn from our ethnography can tell us something we don't already know about what kinds of things there are in the world. (Laidlaw 'Ontologically Challenged')

But although Pederson does make as good a case for it as I think may be possible, the elaborate super-ontology of perspectivist multinaturalism is neither required for his fascinating account of north-Mongolian shamanism, and nor does that account constitute evidence for it. The central conviction of this book, I think, is that the anthropologist should take seriously the concepts and theories embodied in the ethnographic data, as concepts to think with and use in ethnographic analysis, rather than supposing that we already have all the concepts we need, because we already know all the kinds of stuff of which social reality might be composed – those dead 'containers of sociocultural content and their purported political-economic context'. We should be open to the possibility that

what we learn from our ethnography can tell us something we don't already know about what kinds of things there are in the world. (Laidlaw 'Ontologically Challenged')

First, the belief [in the survival of *angatse*] is not held universally; second, the belief that some mental properties of the person survive after death is interpreted, understood, and elaborated in a great variety of ways by different people. And finally, and most significantly, Vezo believe in the survival of the angatse in some contexts and they do not believe in the survival of the angatse in other contexts. This does not make their belief in the power of the ancestors any less compelling, when it is believed; but it shows that the belief in the power of the ancestors is best approached in terms of when and where it is deployed, rather than in terms of whether it is held. (Astuti 'Ancestors and the Afterlife' 75)

The basic sequence here – people create ('make') something; then they act as if that thing has power over them – is of course just the sort of thing Marx was thinking of when he spoke of 'fetishism'. There are two curious things here. One is that those involved seemed not entirely unaware that this was happening: both that these objects were constructed and, at the same time, that they came to have some kind of power over those who constructed them. (Graeber 'Fetishism as social creativity' 425)

Even when fetishes were not explicitly about establishing contracts of one sort or another, they were almost invariably the basis for creating something new: congregations, new social relations, new communities. Hence any 'totality' involved was, at least at first, virtual, imaginary, and prospective. What is more – and this is the really crucial point – it was an imaginary totality that could only come into real existence if everyone acted as if the fetish object actually did have subjective qualities. In the case of contracts, this means: act as if it really will punish them for breaking the rules. (Graeber 'Festishism as social creativity' 430)

Yet this is precisely where we find the logic of fetishism cropping up – even the origin of the word 'fetish' – and it doesn't seem to be misrepresenting anything. Of course it would also be going too far to say that the fetishistic view is simply true: Lunkanka cannot really tie anyone's intestines into knots; Ravololona cannot really prevent hail from falling on anyone's crops. As I have remarked elsewhere (Graeber, 2001), ultimately we are probably just dealing here with the paradox of power, power being something which exists only if other people think it does; a paradox that I have also argued lies also at the core of magic, which always seems to be surrounded by an aura of fraud, showmanship, and chicanery. But one could argue it is not just the paradox of power. It is also the paradox of creativity. (Graeber 'Fetishism as social creativity' 430)

Now, even aside from the question of whether this means that the very nature of power is somewhat paradoxically circular, could there really be a society in which people acted as if they were perfectly well aware that this was the case? Would this not mean that power itself—at least in its nastier, most obviously harmful manifestations—would cease to exist, in much the same way as harmful magic would? One can almost imagine an earlier Malagasy farmer coming to the same conclusion about one of Bloch's bandit kings that my friend did about medicine: Well, I guess I must believe in them; or, in this case: they must

really be emanations of my desire for a unifying power that will make us all members of the same unbroken kingdom, since after all, I do keep giving them unbroken coins. (Graeber *Toward* 245)

Obviously, when a group of people takes an oath to create new rights and obligations among each other and call on an object to strike them dead if they fail to live up to those obligations, that object does not thereby acquire the power to do so. But in another sense, it—or the faith people place in it—really does have the power to bring a new social order into being. (Graeber *Toward* 251)

References

Astuti - Ancestors and the Afterlife Graeber 2001 Toward 2005 - Fetishism as social creativity 2015 'Radical Alterity' Muir Bird-David