

## Deflationary Social Ontology Isn't So Easy

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### Section 1

*Intuitive Argument 1 (Thomasson):*

"[I]f one believes that a certain society collectively accepts that two unmarried people who knowingly and willingly take prescribed vows before a justice of the peace and two witnesses "count as" married [...] and believes that some people fulfill these conditions, it makes little sense [...] to deny that there are marriages, or to hold that all talk about marriages (like talk about dragons) must be pretenseful or mistaken." (Thomasson 2003a 285-286)

*Intuitive Argument 2 (Sperber):*

P1. A group of people believes that marriage entails the existence of a deity.

P2. Deities don't exist.

C1. Therefore no real entity exists which could be the referent of their term 'marriage'. (*Despite* the fact that marriages are widely believed in.)

*Question:* Does the difference between deflationism and eliminativism about (many) social kinds come down to the question of what ontological commitments are locally associated with terms for these purported kinds? (In addition to the question whether things like deities exist.)

### Section 2

*Question:* Is Sperber's (P1) plausible? Do local understandings of things like marriage often entail commitment to the existence of deities etc.?

*Answer:* Yes, at least sometimes. Although we should proceed with caution when interpreting the details of any given social practice or set of beliefs.

*In support of this answer:*

*Graeber (2005; 2015)*

Expressions of scepticism about magical practices are widespread, but should often be understood as one part of a deep *ambivalence* about magic (etc.)

Many conventions for making agreements, contracts, etc. work only because people believe, at least some of the time, that something more is involved, over and above mere agreement and persuasion.

*Astuti (2009)*

A standard anthropological interpretation of Vezo practices might conclude that:

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 2007 64)

Astuti's experiment asked Vezo participants whether a (fictionalised) man who had died was still able to think, feel, remember, whether he still needed food, etc. Main results:

- i. Many people gave answers which implied that mental<sup>1</sup> processes can continue after death.
- ii. Some people gave answers which implied that bodily process can continue after death.
- iii. But some people also gave answers which implied that *no* mental or bodily processes continue after death.

Answers were also contextually variable. When the vignette described the man's body in the hospital, 57% implied that some mental processes continue after death; when it described him as 'over at the tombs', 87% implied that some mental processes continue after death.

### Section 3

*Question:* Given that we are granting Sperber's (P1), at least for the sake of argument, must we accept his conclusion?

*Answer:* At least within anthropology, Sperber's eliminativist conclusion is not universally accepted.

*Two alternatives to Sperber's approach:*

1. (Roughly) accepts Sperber's thought that anthropological uses of terms like 'marriage' should adopt the same ontological commitments as they have in the culture being described,<sup>2</sup> but adopts a methodological principle of affirming local ontologies. ('Ontological Turn'.)
2. Rejects Sperber's thought that anthropological uses of a term should adopt the same ontological commitments as they have in the culture being described.

This allows us to maintain that the following is a coherent form of claim:

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

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1 'Mental' and 'bodily' are Astuti's labels, but she does not appear to address the question of the validity of dividing up the options this way, in relation to Vezo thought.

2 Sperber actually thinks that anthropological use of terms like 'marriage' is 'interpretive' and carries almost no ontological commitment at all; the implication of Sperber's argument is rather that *if* anthropological discourse *were* ontologically committal, it would absorb the commitments of local terms.

associated locally with ontological commitments which are not in fact fulfilled.

This approach is, I think, implicit in Graeber and others.<sup>3</sup>

## Section 4

*Demystification in Thomasson's words:*

"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." (Thomasson 2003b 606-607)

*Problem 1:*

*Ontology Made Easy* appears, at times, to conflate the following two kinds of conditions (for institutional kinds K):

The conditions under which the term 'K' applies.

The conditions which are collectively accepted as sufficient for the existence of a K.

Call these conditions 'C'.

A dilemma:

*Horn 1. C does not mention a role for collective acceptance of constitutive rules.*

e.g. "if two suitable people knowingly visit the justice of the peace, sincerely say the relevant vows and undertake the relevant paperwork, they come to be married" (OME 188).

These are conditions which could be satisfied in a world where no-one had the concept of marriage.<sup>4</sup> But this leads to a tension between the following two commitments: a) an X exists in any world where the application conditions for 'X' are satisfied; b) institutional kinds exist only in worlds where people collectively accept the rules which generate them.

*Horn 2. So maybe C does mention a role for collective acceptance of constitutive rules.*

e.g. if two people say vows and sign paperwork *and there is collective acceptance that these conditions (including the one in italics) are sufficient for two people to be married* then these people are married.

This allows us to reconcile (a) and (b), but it doesn't make room for people to be mistaken about the nature of their social kinds, in the way described by Thomasson above.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Graeber does not presume that the 'real' things will turn out to be all and only those that 'we' already acknowledge. He explicitly argues that realism should encourage us to turn a critical eye on our own practices, and to be open to learning from others about what really exists (2015). See also Todd (2016) on the importance of the latter.

<sup>4</sup> The conditions could be interpreted in such a way that this would not be true (cf. Anscombe; Epstein[?]) but this would likely cause a different kind of trouble for commitment (a).

### Problem 2:

The following dependence principle (for concrete institutional kind K) makes room for a distinction between application conditions and collectively accepted rules:

“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.” (Thomasson 2003b 587)

DP1 also allows for people to be unaware that K is put in place by collective acceptance.

However, DP1 does not allow for *substantive* mistakes about the conditions for there to be a K. So it does not allow for all of the forms of ‘mystification’ described in Section 3.

But then there is a tension between the following three claims:

- A) People cannot be substantively wrong about their own social kinds, when these depend on collective acceptance in the sort of way spelled out by principles like DP1. (See above.)
- B) All ‘conceptually transparent’<sup>5</sup> social kinds depend on collective acceptance in the sort of way spelled out by principles like DP1. (Implied by e.g. Thomasson 2003a 287)
- C) There are conceptually transparent social kinds about whose nature people can be substantively wrong, e.g. marriage, contract, etc. (From Section 3 above.)

I suggest that we may need to give up the understanding of ‘collective acceptance’ which makes (A) and (B) seem simultaneously plausible.

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5 ‘Conceptually transparent’ means that the kind depends for its existence on our thinking about it as such. Thomasson’s key example of a conceptually *opaque* kind is recessions. We can be wrong in all sorts of ways about conceptually opaque kinds (Thomasson 2003a 288).

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