

Deflationary Social Ontology Isn't So Easy

Pete Faulconbridge

Sketch of Sperber's (1996) argument

P1. The Ebelo take marriage to be a union blessed by the spirits of ancestors, and many Christians understand it to be a sacrament sanctioned by the Christian God.

P2. But there are no ancestor spirits or deities.

C1. So, there are no marriages (or at least no Christian or Ebelo marriages).

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

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.

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

David 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.

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

Rita 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 2009 64)
- But can this interpretation be tested in other ways?

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

Rita Astuti (2009)

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:

1. Many people gave answers which implied that mental* processes can continue after death.
2. Some people gave answers which implied that bodily* process can continue after death.
3. 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: Anthropological Responses to local ontological commitments

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.

Section 3: Anthropological Responses to local ontological commitments

First alternative to Sperber:

(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,¹ but adopts a methodological principle of affirming local ontologies. ('Ontological Turn'.)

Section 3: Anthropological Responses to local ontological commitments

Second alternative to Sperber:

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

This approach is, I think, implicit in Graeber and many others. (This needn't rest on an assumption that 'we' already know what's real, though (cf. Graeber 2015; Todd 2016).)

Section 4: Demystification and Collective Acceptance

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)

Section 4: Demystification and Collective Acceptance

Dependence Principle for concrete institutional kind K:

“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 allows for certain kinds of mystification, but it does not appear to leave room for substantive local ignorance or mistake about conditions C , whatever they may be.

Section 4: Demystification and Collective Acceptance

There appears to be 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' 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.

Bibliography

- ❑ Astuti, Rita. (2009) 'Ancestors and the Afterlife' *Quaderns De l'Institut Català d'Antropologia*, 23, pp. 61-78
- ❑ Bird-David, Nurit. (1999) "Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology', *Current Anthropology*, 40(1), pp.S67-S91.
- ❑ Graeber, David. (2005) 'Fetishism as social creativity: or, Fetishes are gods in the process of construction', *Anthropological Theory*, 5(4), pp.407-438.
- ❑ - -, - -. (2015) 'Radical alterity is just another way of saying "reality"', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5(2), pp.1-41.
- ❑ Henare, Amiria; Holbraad, Martin; Wastell, Sari. (2007) 'Introduction' in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically*. London: Routledge
- ❑ Holbraad, Martin. (2007) 'The power of powder: multiplicity and motion in the divinatory cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *mana*, again)' in *Thinking Through Things*. London; Routledge.
- ❑ Sperber, Dan (1996) *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*. London: Blackwell.
- ❑ Thomasson, Amie. (2003a) 'Foundations for a Social Ontology', *Protosociology*, 18-19, pp.269-290.
- ❑ - -, - -. (2003b) 'Realism and Human Kinds', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 67(3), pp.580-609.
- ❑ - -, - -. (2015) *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ❑ Todd, Zoe. (2016) "Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1), pp.4-22.