



## A new paradigm in social ontology

Åsa Burman: *Nonideal social ontology: the power view*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023, 264 pp, \$90.00 HB

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Åsa Burman's book *Nonideal Social Ontology: The Power View* offers something valuable for both newcomers and experts in the field of social ontology. Newcomers will appreciate Burman's detailed introduction to three major figures, Raimo Tuomela, John Searle, and Margaret Gilbert (henceforth "the Big Three"), as well as her overview of the more recent literature. Experts will find a compelling argument that the Big Three take an "ideal" approach to social ontology in the sense of Charles Mills' distinction between ideal and nonideal theory (Mills 2005), but that we should instead approach social ontology through a "nonideal" lens. Besides her development of nonideal theory, Burman's most important contribution is her careful analysis of the various forms of social power, which she believes ought to be central to social ontology.

Importantly, Burman does not claim that the theories of the Big Three are inadequate accounts of specific domains within social ontology, such as joint intentionality. Instead, they go too far in claiming to provide (i) a general ontology of social and institutional reality (the "scope claim") and (ii) a foundation for the social sciences (the "foundation claim"). Burman agrees that these are the proper ends of social ontology but argues that the shared commitments of the Big Three frustrate these goals. The scope and foundation claims are thus central to Burman's argument. But how do we know if a theory of the social circumscribes social or institutional facts accurately, without begging the question against the theory? And why think that there is a single foundation shared by social sciences like linguistics and economics? I return to these questions below.

In the introduction and first chapter, Burman brings together Francesco Guala's (2007) criticism of the "standard model of social ontology" with Mills' notion of "ideal" theory, thereby developing her "standard model of ideal social ontology." With Guala, she argues that the standard model of social ontology emphasizes collective intentionality, performativity, and reflexivity of social phenomena. To

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Guala's model she adds that the standard approach to social ontology lacks a critical stance toward oppressive social relations. Thus, Mills' distinction between ideal and nonideal theory becomes relevant. Burman claims that her model is superior to that of Mills (14), though it is unclear how, if they describe different phenomena, as Mills is concerned with political theory. The result is that, according to the standard model of ideal social ontology, social facts are *direct, transparent, and deontic social phenomena built on consensus*. Burman argues convincingly that the Big Three are committed to each thesis.

In the second chapter, Burman criticizes the standard model of ideal social ontology. First, the standard model posits collective intentionality as either a requirement for all institutions or for standard institutions. Burman chooses examples of paradigmatically institutional facts—like the fact that two people are married—and then argues that it is conceivable that these facts obtain without collective intentionality. Consider the case of *strategic marriage*. Burman argues that it is possible to enter into a strategic marriage, e.g., between royal families, without any irreducible collective intentionality. It is plausible that the participants in the marriage do not need to form a collective intention in order to successfully marry, but does that show that there is *no* collective intentionality involved? An ideal social ontologist might think that the example still depends on collective intentionality to support the existence of the institution.

Burman then argues that the ideal theory's emphasis on the reflexivity and performativity of the social encourage us to ignore "opaque" social phenomena like economic class. Following Muhammad Ali Khalidi (2015), Burman distinguishes between three kinds of social kinds: (i) those that can exist without anyone knowing ("opaque" kinds); (ii) those that must be recognized to exist as a kind, though tokens may exist without anyone knowing; and (iii) those that must be recognized both as a kind and in each instance of a token of the kind. Economic class is arguably an instance of the first kind of social kind, since it is possible for a society to be structured by economic classes without anyone having conceptualized the existence of, say, the working class as a social kind.

Burman believes opaque social kinds can be paradigmatic of the social, even if they metaphysically depend on transparent social kinds. So, it is worth considering the strength of the distinction. Are ideal social ontologists really committed to the claim that *all* social kinds must be explicitly recognized? They presumably would recognize that there are complex disjunctions of social properties that no one has ever thought of. Surely it is too quick to reject ideal theory because such social kinds are possible. But is class much different? On a Marxist conception, one's class is determined by one's relationship to the means of production, which is in turn determined by facts about ownership, which arguably fall into Khalidi's second kind. Burman does not spell out what she means by class; a more careful analysis would bolster her argument against ideal theory.

The third chapter begins the second part of the book, which concerns *nonideal* theories. Nonideal theories each reject some tenet of the standard model of ideal social ontology. They tend to focus on real-world cases and highlight the oppressive nature of social relations. Burman considers the nonideal theories of Ásta, Johan Brännmark, Sally Haslanger, and Katharine Jenkins. Here Burman's argument plays

the double role of describing and defending a paradigm shift in social ontology. But she does not defend every direction the nonideal theories have gone. Emancipatory social ontology, represented by Jenkins, rejects the scope and foundation goals, instead aiming to create a just society. Burman's preferred nonideal social ontology is more moderate; she accepts the scope and foundation goals as common ground with ideal theory but argues that the ideal theories cannot satisfy them.

Burman's primary objection to existing nonideal theories is that they cannot explain the importance of economic class. Class is, as described above, an opaque social kind. Burman argues that the accounts of Ásta, Brännmark, and Haslanger all rely too heavily on individual attitudes, and so cannot capture opaque kinds. She also argues that these theories miss the importance of social power. Jenkins' theory avoids these objections but does not offer a general theory of social ontology.

The fifth and sixth chapters clarify and defend Burman's power view. She introduces the notion of *telic power* and distinguishes it from deontic power. An agent has telic power in a domain if and only if there is an ideal that the agent can be measured against and the distance from the ideal as perceived by other agents affects the ability of the agent to effect certain outcomes in that domain. She argues that telic power captures aspects of the social world neglected due to the focus on deontic power. Further, she believes telic powers interact in interesting ways with deontic powers and so offer deeper explanations of complex phenomena.

Burman argues that it is possible to have telic power without any corresponding deontic powers. She assumes that deontic powers only exist if institutions in Searle's sense exist (192 Fn. 8). But consider a norm that a young able-bodied person ought to give up their seat for an elderly person. The young person is arguably socially obligated to give up their seat, and the elderly person entitled to it, even if there is no Searlean institution in place. More generally, I was left curious why norms can give rise to telic powers but not deontic powers in the absence of an institution.

Given that gender offers a paradigm case of telic power through masculine and feminine ideals, one might worry: has it really been neglected? It seems that many philosophers and social scientists investigated the nature and effects of gender norms. Burman does not deny this. She argues that these discussions are largely absent from the social ontology literature and have not been situated within a general framework of social power. She shows that the notion of power ties together traditionally separate areas of social theory, the deontic and institutions on one hand, norms and stereotypes on the other.

The sixth and final chapter introduces new types of social power and argues that social power offers a taxonomy of social facts. The taxonomy first splits into facts about power and those not about power. Among those about power, there are those about power directly dependent on the intentionality of agents and those indirectly dependent. Direct forms include deontic and telic powers, while indirect forms include spillover and structural powers. An agent has spillover powers when their existing deontic powers bring additional powers, positive or negative. For example, an employee may be susceptible to demands that go beyond their formal work contract, for if they do not follow the demands, they are at risk of losing their job. Social structural power exists when a social structure affects an agent's ability to effect outcomes. Social structures exist, according to Burman, when members of a collective have their opportunities

restricted or enhanced in virtue of being members of that collective. It follows that all social structures entail social structural powers. Her definition of social structure may be too broad, however, since it would seem to include geographic differences, e.g., living on a mountain versus in a valley, as social structures, among other cases.

Burman argues that her taxonomy is preferable in all contexts. But what taxonomy we use seems inquiry relative. For example, Khalidi's taxonomy of social facts is used throughout Burman's book, so clearly it is a useful taxonomy. Further, social facts *not* about social power all go into one box in Burman's taxonomy. But there do seem to be interesting differences among these. For example, many distinctions in linguistics do not obviously concern social power, nor do many social distinctions between artifacts. If there are important distinctions between non-power kinds, then we will need to revise Burman's taxonomy, and the notion of social power may lose pride of place.

Finally, let us return to the scope and foundation claims. At one point, Burman defines the social as "any fact involving the intentionality of two or more agents" (205). But this definition is too broad, since it includes conjunctive facts like [Tom believes it is raining and Mary believes it is sunny], which do not seem to be social. So, in what sense does Burman's nonideal social ontology satisfy the scope and foundation claims?

According to the Big Three, it seems that providing a foundation for the social sciences is in large part explaining the mark of the social, thereby explaining the distinctive focus of the social sciences. The notion of social power cannot play *that* role at the risk of circularity. Social power instead seems to play a *unifying* role in Burman's theory: the various social sciences are all really about social power. But is that true? Burman's taxonomy certainly illuminates distinctions within the notion of social power, but I would have liked to see further defense of the claim that all social science ultimately concerns social power.

Burman's book achieves much in a short span. She carefully traces a paradigm shift in social ontology while also contributing significantly to that shift. She argues persuasively that the commitments of the Big Three preclude a general social ontology and that current nonideal theories cannot adequately capture economic class. At times the reader is left wanting further explanation and defense of key claims, but that is the nature of such an ambitious work. I am sure that a new generation of social ontologists will find *Nonideal Social Ontology* an essential resource for their own contributions to the field.

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