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# Social Construction and Grounding

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The aim of this paper is to bring recent work on metaphysical grounding to bear on the phenomenon of social construction. It is argued that grounding can be used to analyze social construction and that the grounding framework is helpful for articulating various claims and commitments of social constructionists, especially about social identities, e.g., gender and race. The paper also responds to a number of objections that have been (or could be) leveled against the application of grounding to social construction from Elizabeth Barnes (2014), Mari Mikkola (2015), and Jessica Wilson (2014).

## 1. Introduction

It is common to hear claims about this-or-that being "socially constructed." Race, gender, class, mental illness, quarks, and even the whole of reality have been the alleged products of social construction. The notion figures centrally in a number of disciplines, projects, and social and political causes. Despite (or better because of) its pervasive use, there is no universally accepted account of social construction. There is disagreement about what gets constructed, what does the constructing, the nature of such construction, and the extent of construction, i.e., how much of reality, if any, is socially constructed. The aim of this paper is not to answer all or even most of these questions. It is to characterize an important form of social construction in terms of the notion of metaphysical grounding ('grounding,' henceforth), which has received significance attention in recent metaphysics.[1] Understanding social construction in terms of grounding allows us to articulate dependence structures within social reality in such a way that constructed items are real but also derivative of other aspects of social reality.[2]

Section 2 introduces the relevant notions of social construction and grounding. Section 3 provides an analysis of social construction in terms of grounding. It also shows how we can articulate the central claims and commitments of social constructionists within the grounding framework. Finally, section 4 entertains and answers a number of

[1] See Fine (2001; 2012), Rosen (2010), Schaffer (2009), Audi (2012a; 2012b), Correia and Schnieder (2012), Trogdon (2013a), and Bliss and Trogdon (2016).

[2] Brian Epstein deserves credit for being the first to explicitly apply grounding to social construction. In a number of articles (2009), (2013), (2014) (2016), and a book (2015) he's developed a framework for social ontology in which grounding plays a central role. Schaffer (forthcoming a) also applies grounding to social construction. Ásta Sveinsdóttir (2011; 2013) uses the terminology of "conferral" to describe social construction. As far as I can tell, nothing in Ásta's discussion distinguishes the relation of conferral from grounding.

worries about analyzing social construction in terms of grounding from Barnes (2014), Mikkola (2015), and Wilson (2014).

## 2. Social Construction and Grounding

Very generally, for some item to be socially constructed is for it to be a product of social factors, including e.g., social practices, arrangements, conventions, and institutions. The constructed item is (causally or non-causally) *derived* from and *dependent* upon certain social factors for its existence, nature, or features; the item would not exist, or be the way it is, were it not for these factors. Despite their status as derivative and non-fundamental, socially constructed items are often thought to be real, being causally relevant features of reality that, in some cases, have significant ramifications for one's lived experience. Some items are uncontroversially social constructions, e.g., the categories of being a US Senator and being a landlord. However, the more interesting and important cases of social construction tend to be cases of "covert constructions,"[3] e.g., constructions of race and gender. In these cases, the item is widely thought to be inevitable, natural, or beyond human control, but is in fact a product of contingent and alterable human sociality.

'Grounding,' on the other hand, is used to denote a distinctively metaphysical, non-causal way in which some features of reality give rise to other features of reality. Grounded items are dependent upon and explained by what they are grounded in. What is grounded is derived, produced, or generated from what is metaphysically more fundamental. Some take grounding to impose a partial ordering across levels of reality by being asymmetric, irreflexive, and transitive.[4] The notion resists analysis in merely modal terms, e.g., necessitation or supervenience. One reason for this is that such modal relations do not always entail priority or directionality. Grounding, on the other hand, does: grounds are more fundamental than and give rise to what they ground. In general, talk of grounding can be understood as an attempt to articulate metaphysical and explanatory structures in reality; structures that connect what is dependent, derivative, and in need of explanation to what is (relatively) independent, non-derivative, or not (or less) in need of explanation.

## 3. Social Construction as Grounding

Brain Epstein (2013) claims that "The project of social ontology is built on the observation that social facts are not "brute" facts in nature." He goes on to claim that social ontologists are in the business of providing an "account of the other facts in virtue of which social facts are the case." If the socially constructed is not brute or fundamental, but derivative and dependent, and grounding is a metaphysical 'in virtue of' relation, then it is plausible to understand social construction in terms of the more general and pervasive relation of grounding.[5] Along with Epstein (2013; 2015; 2016) and Schaffer (forthcoming a), I think that for something to be socially constructed is for it to be (at least

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3 I get this term from Mallon (2003: 332) who got it from Griffiths (1997: chp. 6).

4 See Correia (2010), Fine (2001; 2012), Schaffer (2009; 2012), Litland (2013), Raven (2013), Jenkins (2011), and Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015) on the formal principles of grounding.

5 Some grounding theorists treat 'grounds' as an operator rather than a relation, e.g., Fine (2001; 2012: 46) and Correia (2010). Nothing turns on my assumption here; everything said about social construction as grounding can be stated in terms of the 'operator' view.

partly) grounded in social reality.[6] To identify instances of social construction is to identify grounding structures within social reality. Our focus will be on the construction of social facts. In particular, the non-causal social construction of social identities, e.g., gender, race, class, disability, etc. Facts involving a person S and a human social kind K, let's say, are 'identity facts,' which have the form [S is a K].[7] The social construction of such facts is analyzed as follows:

> *Social Construction as Grounding* (SCG): S is non-causally socially constructed as a K iff [S is a K] is at least partly grounded in particular features of social reality.[8]

What distinguishes socially constructed identities from other cases of social grounding (e.g., normative or aesthetic facts), is not the *way* in which they are grounded but rather their *grounds*, i.e., the "particular features of social reality" serving as their grounds.[9] First, their grounds are specific, repeated patterns of human interaction.[10] Constructionists debate amongst themselves the exact nature of these patterns and the individual's place in them. But they tend to agree that the grounds are relatively stable, systematic, structured, and network-like.[11] Second, their grounds involve individual or collective responses to the subject's body (or the perception thereof), e.g., genitalia, function in reproduction, or skin color.[12] Third, their grounds are not inevitable, natural, or fixed.[13] As Barnes notes with respect to the relevant social patterns, "there's nothing intrinsically privileged about the way we in fact organize ourselves" (2014: 337). This is not simply to say that these patterns are contingent or that it is merely metaphysically possible for these patters to be different. Rather, the grounds for social identities are, in some sense, within our control. They may be transformed or eliminated by specific kinds of social action. In particular, social action that transforms or eliminates the social patterns grounding social identities, thereby transforms or eliminates those identities (assuming those

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6 Or, if we adopt Epstein's 'ground-anchor' model, we could say that socially constructed facts are either partially socially grounded facts or partially socially anchored facts. Roughly, anchors of a fact explain why it has the grounds that it does. See chapters 6 and 9 of Epstein (2015) for discussion of the difference between grounds and anchors. Epstein (2015: 74ff.) argues that what Searle (1995; 2010) is attempting to capture with his influential 'constitutive rules' account of social facts are the conditions for *grounding* kinds of social facts.

7 Let '[p]' denote 'the fact that p.'

8 Cf. Epstein (2015: chps. 5, 6). Schaffer (forthcoming a) defends an analysis similar to SCG.
On my view, *causal* social construction, e.g., one's gender being a causal product one's upbringing, should be understood in relation to non-causal social construction, i.e., grounding. To say that X is causally socially constructed by Y is to say that Y is the cause of Z, the (non-causal) grounds for X. Thanks to Paul Audi for discussion about this issue.

9 Thanks to Brad Rettler and an anonymous referee for raising this issue. See Epstein (2014) where he argues that different social kinds are *anchored* differently.

10 Barnes (2014: 337). Schaffer (forthcoming a) makes the same point.

11 One might worry that this characterization neglects Ásta's (2013) conception of gender construction, on which *individuals* confer gender upon each other. However, these kind of social structures are not absent from her account. She thinks that individuals gain the "authority" to confer gender by "citing" or "echoing" social structures operative outside of the particular context (2013: 724).

12 See Alcoff (2006: 172), Ásta (2013: 722ff.), Haslanger (2000: 38–9), and Witt (2011: chp. 2) with respect to gender.

13 See Hacking (1999: 6ff; 19–20), Diaz-Leon (2013: 1138), and Haslanger (2003: 302ff.) for discussion of the non-inevitability of socially constructed items.

patterns are not replaced by other social grounds) (cf. Diaz-Leon (2013: 1145)). Admittedly, this does not distinguish all the various kinds of social grounding. But it does help demarcate an important class of social constructions—the ones that are the focus of this paper—in terms of their grounds.

One motivation for SCG is theoretical unification. If Schaffer (2009: 364) is right that grounding is the fundamental unifying concept of metaphysical structure or dependence, then we'd do well to cast social construction in terms of grounding. This is because we'd be able to model, in the same theoretical framework, how dependence structures in social reality are connected with the structures between what is fundamental and everything else. That is, it would allow us to situate socially constructed phenomena within the general metaphysical discussion of the structure of reality (cf. Schaffer (forthcoming a)).

Another motivation for SCG is that the grounding framework provides social constructionists with a common and rigorous set of conceptual tools. This is advantageous for constructionists, given that the literature on social construction spans a number of disciplines and the notion is used in a dizzying number of ways. Often it is unanalyzed and undefined. In the remainder of this section, I'll show how debates over social construction and various claims of constructionists can be inscribed in the grounding framework.

First, we can put grounding to use in framing the debate between the social constructionist and the 'traditionalist' who thinks that the target item is real but not socially constructed. Suppose a traditionalist and a social constructionist are having an argument about being a woman. Suppose, too, that both sides agree about the general characteristics of and expectations for women in their society. The traditionalist says, 'S is woman only because S has female anatomy.' The social constructionist disagrees, saying, 'S is woman because of the social position S occupies.' What is the crux of the debate here? From the perspective of grounding, the debate hinges on the nature of the grounds of [S is a woman]. It is customary to distinguish *partial* from *full* grounds. If $\phi$ partially grounds $\psi$, then $\phi$ helps ground $\psi$ or contributes to the grounding of $\psi$: $\phi$ together with some other facts fully ground $\psi$, i.e., $\phi$ is a subset of the facts that fully ground $\psi$.[14] If $\phi$ fully grounds $\psi$, then $\phi$ is sufficient to explain $\psi$; no other facts are needed to explain $\psi$. The debate between our interlocutors, then, is a debate over the proper full grounds of [S is a woman]. The traditionalist holds that S's anatomy is a full ground for [S is a woman]. She holds that there are full grounding chains running directly from the identity fact down to the more fundamental, mind or culture-independent biological facts about S's anatomy. The social constructionist, attempting to 'debunk'[15] the allegedly inevitable or natural grounds of gender identities, says that, *at most*, [S is a woman] is *partially* grounded in S's anatomy. The full grounds of the identity fact involve unexpected or hidden social facts, i.e., S's social position, etc. The grounding chains, if they run down to the biological at all, also and primarily run down to other contingent social facts.

Second, many constructionists about social identities oppose 'essentialist' views on which all members of a social kind share a set of *particular* properties essential (hence, necessary) for belonging to that social kind. Gender anti-essentialists, for instance, are skeptical that there is a single set of experiences, features, or social expectations which

[14] This is Fine's (2012: 50) notion of partial strict grounding.

[15] See Haslanger (2003). The 'debunking project' seeks to expose kinds and categories thought to be natural—especially those that function in oppressive and discriminatory social arrangements—for what they are, viz. social, contingent, and alterable.

every woman must have or fulfill in order to be a woman.[16] Grounding theorists are still debating the connection between ground and essence.[17] Without further assumptions about that connection, the grounding framework is neutral on the question of (anti-)essentialism about social identities. Given this neutrality, we can inscribe essentialist/anti-essentialist debates in the grounding framework. Here is one way to do so. The essentialist about the social kind K claims that it is in the essence of *being a K* that any instantiation of *being a K* is grounded in the instantiation of a particular set of properties F, G, H, . . . Hence, for any S that is a K, [S is a K] is grounded in [S is F], [S is G], [S is H], . . .[18] The anti-essentialist, on the other hand, denies that it is in the essence of *being a K* to be grounded exclusively in the instantiation of F, G, H, . . .(or any other properties). Instead, she holds that different persons may be Ks in virtue of different grounds. Thus, [S is a K] may have multiple full grounds, which involve properties other than F, G, H, . . ., which display significant diversity. Anti-essentialists about *being a K* may disagree about the extent to which, if any, these grounds share something in common.

Even the most restrictive conceptions of grounding seem to be able to accommodate the anti-essentialist's commitment to diversity in the grounds of identity facts. Audi (2012a; 2012b) puts a constraint on grounding connections that the constituent properties in facts that ground and are grounded be 'essentially connected' (2012a: 693ff.). This would, for example, require the property *being a woman* in the grounded fact, [S is a woman], to be essentially connected to properties in the facts serving as the grounds for [S is a woman]. This constraint does not entail that there is one set of properties had by all women that are essential to *being a woman*. All it entails is that whatever properties are involved in the grounds for [S is a woman] are, in some way or another, essentially connected to the property *being a woman*. This is compatible with different persons being women in virtue of importantly different facts. It may help to think of this in terms of determinable/determinate properties. The fact that *a* is red can be grounded in the fact that *a* is maroon or the fact that *a* is scarlet or the fact that *a* is vermillion, and so on. Similarly, the fact that S is a woman can be grounded in the fact that S is $F_1$, . . ., $F_n$ or the fact that S is $G_1$, . . ., $G_n$ or the fact that S is $H_1$, . . ., $H_n$, and so on. Audi's view (when applied to the construction of gender identities) does entail that *being a woman* has some essence and that the properties in facts grounding instantiations of *being a woman* share something in common. If the essence of *being a woman* is generic enough, though, the grounds for its instantiation will admit of enough diversity to avoid what is thought to be problematic about gender essentialism, viz. thinking that one can be a woman only in virtue of the instantiation of a particular set of properties.

Third, socially constructed identities are thought to be contextually sensitive, in that an individual may have a particular identity in one context but fail to have it in another. There are at least two ways in which the contextual sensitivity of social kinds might be articulated in the grounding framework. First, consider Haslanger's claim that "one's

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16 See Alcoff (2006: chp. 5), Mallon (2007), Spelman (1988), Stoljar (1995), Stone (2007: chp. 5), Witt (1995, 2011), and Zack (2005) for discussions of gender essentialism.

17 Fine (2012: I.11, 2015), Correia (2013), and Carnino (2015) offer different views on the connection between essence and ground.

18 The essentialist might further think that the properties in the grounds are essential properties of Ks (as Ks) or are constituents in a real definition of *being a K*. See Koslicki (2012) on the connection between essence and real definition. Rosen (2015) discusses the connection between grounding and real definition. Rosen's view is discussed briefly in section 4.

gender may not be entirely stable, and that other systems of oppression may disrupt gender in particular contexts" (Haslanger 2000: 42). On her view of *being a woman*,

> *S is a woman* iff$_{df}$ S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. (2000: 39)[19]

Understood in terms of grounding, the grounds for S's being a woman will involve facts of the following kind:

(i) [S is systematically subordinated along dimension D];
(ii) [S has (or is imagined to have) the bodily features $F_1, \ldots, F_n$ presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction];
(iii) [S is a target for subordination because S has (or is imagined to have) $F_1, \ldots, F_n$].

Different forms of subordination may stand in for D and different bodily features for $F_1, \ldots, F_n$. Haslanger's definition, therefore, allows different persons to be women in virtue of being subordinated along different dimensions on the basis of different bodily features. Despite this variability in the possible grounds for *being a woman*, Haslanger's definition is context-*insensitive* insofar as it provides criteria for *being a woman* across all contexts.[20] Consequently, if instances of (i), (ii), and (iii)[21] obtain, then S is woman regardless of what context she is in. In order to account for the contextual instability of *being a woman*, we can relativize it to a context: S is a woman in context C just in case the grounds for [S is a woman]—instances of (i), (ii), and (iii)—obtain in C.[22] Hence, S would not be a woman in C if certain features of C prevented instances of (i), (ii), and (iii) from obtaining in C. Nevertheless, S may be a woman in other contexts where the relevant grounds obtain. On this view, the range of facts that can serve as grounds for [S is a woman] is invariant across contexts, yet whether any of those facts obtain may vary from context to context.

The second way to understand the contextual sensitivity of social kinds draws on a view discussed above, viz. that the instantiation of a social kind K may have multiple distinct grounds. The contextual sensitivity of K, then, consists in the fact that different instantiations of *being a K* may have different grounds in different contexts. Haslanger's view of *being a woman* can also be interpreted along these lines. On her account, S is a woman (in part) if S is systematically subordinated along *some* dimension on the basis of *certain bodily features* (real or imagined) that are presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. Because *being a woman* is defined so broadly, S may be a woman in context $C_1$ in virtue of, say, S's being systematically subordinated on the

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19 For an individual to be "marked" as target for some treatment, according to Haslanger, is for the individual to have certain properties that play a role in a view of the world that serves to motivate certain social arrangements (2000: 39).

20 Cf. Epstein (2015: 68).

21 An instance of (i), for example, would be [S is systematically subordinated economically].

22 It is worth noting that Haslanger speaks of S *functioning as* a woman in C rather than *being* a woman in C (2000: 43). She thinks that one can be a gendered woman, presumably across contexts, without functioning as a woman in every context (cf. 2000: fn. 15).

basis of feature $F_1$ presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction in $C_1$; in context $C_2$, S may be a woman in virtue of S's being systematically subordinated on the basis of feature $F_2$ presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction in $C_2$.[23] A more restrictive version of this view is that there are *unique* grounds for the instantiation of *being a K* from one context to the next. Hence, S may be a K in context $C_1$ in virtue of grounds $\Delta_1$ but not be a K in context $C_2$ where $\Delta_2$, but not $\Delta_1$, serves as grounds for *being a K*. Michael Root's claim that "Race does not travel," could be interpreted this way. He writes, "Some men who are black in New Orleans now would have been octoroons there some years ago or would be white in Brazil today" (2000: S631–632).[24] If different facts function as the grounds for *being black* in different contexts, e.g., present day New Orleans and Brazil, then S's blackness may not 'travel' to contexts in which *being black* is grounded in different facts than it is in S's present context.[25]

If a kind has unique grounds in different contexts, we might wonder whether there's really one and the same kind being instantiated in those contexts. Perhaps one way to assuage this concern is to distinguish between a generic, context-insensitive kind K and various context-sensitive kinds $K_1, \ldots, K_n$, which we might think of as species of K.[26] The definition of *being a K* needs to be broad enough that it allows for *being a K* to have multiple full grounds. Any subject S, regardless of context, is a K if S is appropriately involved in a social situation that qualifies as grounds for *being a K*. Such a kind, being context-insensitive, would 'travel' across contexts. The context-sensitive kinds $K_1, \ldots, K_n$, on the other hand, do not so 'travel.' They will have distinct grounds that are unique to their particular contexts $C_1, \ldots, C_n$.

There may be other ways to model the contextual sensitivity of social kinds in the grounding framework. What the foregoing shows, however, is that the framework supplies ample tools for articulating a number of central claims made by social constructionists.

## 4. Worries about SCG

Recently, Elizabeth Barnes (2014) and Mari Mikkola (2015) have argued that the grounding framework fits poorly with certain aims of feminist theorists. I'll consider four of their worries and argue that none poses a challenge to SCG as an analysis of social construction. I'll also address a concern, inspired by Jessica Wilson's (2014) critique of grounding, about the relation between SCG and so-called 'constitutive' social construction.

### *More than Just What Grounds What?*

Barnes (2014: 344) raises a concern about casting feminist debates (and presumably many others) in terms of grounding. She argues that social constructionists can agree that

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23 This example was suggested to me by an anonymous referee.

24 Ásta (2013: 723ff.) seems to have an analogous view about gender. See Mallon (2004: 656ff.) for discussion of one's race not 'traveling.'

25 This section benefitted from helpful discussion with Brian Epstein on the context-sensitivity of kinds and 'traveling.'

26 I owe the distinction between context-insensitive and context-sensitive kinds to Brian Epstein (email correspondence).

one's being of a certain gender is grounded and that it is grounded in certain social factors, yet still disagree about *what gender is*. This question, she says, is not about what grounds what. Barnes' main concern is that the grounding framework fails to capture the nature of this debate and trivializes it. First, I want to concede that there are substantive debates about gender that are not debates about what grounds what. No part of the grounding approach to social construction contravenes this. It is only given the added meta-metaphysical assumption that substantive metaphysics *only* concerns what grounds what—the very assumption Barnes is attacking—that such a conclusion would follow.

However, I am not convinced that Barnes' example is not about what grounds what. She considers Katharine Jenkins' (2016) critique of Haslanger's account of *being a woman* (see section 3 above). According to Barnes, Jenkins agrees with Haslanger that *being a woman* is grounded in complex hierarchical social roles that subordinate persons on the basis of "normative assumptions about perceived bodily sex characteristics" (Jenkins 2016: 344). Jenkins argues that Haslanger's account excludes certain trans women from counting as women, e.g., trans women who do not publically present as women and who are publically seen as men (2016: 399). Barnes claims that they do not disagree about the fact that *being a woman* is grounded or on the nature of the grounds, yet they do disagree about the nature of *being a woman*. But that's not right. If they agree on the grounds for *being a woman*, but disagree about *what exactly gets grounded*, then they also disagree about what those grounds can produce or give rise to. Jenkins must hold that those grounds produce something—viz. womanhood of a different character—that Haslanger denies they do. So the debate is not just about the nature of *being a woman*, but also about which of the two properties of *being a woman* is grounded in a particular complex social matrix. Moreover, Jenkins and Haslanger actually do disagree about the grounds for *being a woman*. Like Haslanger, Jenkins thinks that one's belonging to the class of women is grounded in complex hierarchical social structures. But unlike Haslanger, Jenkins thinks that the grounds for what she calls one's 'gender-identity' include facts concerning how an individual (consciously or not) takes up and engages with certain features of the relevant social structure (Jenkins 2016: 410). Such facts are not included in the grounds Haslanger identifies for one's *being a woman*. Hence, Jenkins and Haslanger do, pace Barnes, disagree about what grounds what. Even if they agree that the microphysical ultimately grounds gender, they may disagree about what gets grounded by the immediate (and relatively more fundamental) grounds for one's gender. I'm sympathetic to Barnes' focus on the question 'what is gender?' but I don't think questions about what gender is can be cleanly separated from what grounds gender.

### *Problems with Fundamentality?*

Another putative problem for SCG is that the role fundamentality plays in grounding makes it a poor tool with which to understand social reality. According to Mikkola, "It is commonplace to take grounding relations to be fundamental in some sense." (2015: 788). The worry is that "our descent [to the fundamental] may take us away from the interesting social facts in need of elucidation to a level that is of no interest or insight to social ontology" (2015: 788–9).[27] Mikkola offers two ways in which grounding relations might be understood as fundamental:

[27] See Barnes (2014: 341ff.) for a similar worry.

*Relative Fundamentality* (RF): $\phi$ is more fundamental than $\psi$ iff $\phi$ grounds $\psi$ but not ($\psi$ grounds $\phi$).

*Absolute Fundamentality* (AF): $\phi$ is fundamental iff there is no $\zeta$ such that $\zeta$ grounds $\phi$.[28]

Neither seems to me to express the view that grounding *relations* are fundamental; only that they relate what is non-fundamental to what is more fundamental. I fail to see, moreover, how either principle threatens the projects of social ontologists. I *would* worry if using the grounding framework compelled us to acknowledge *only* fundamental entities or if it committed us to thinking that the *only* explanations of social facts can be given in terms of fundamental entities.[29] But nothing in the notion of grounding in SCG, RF, or AF commits us to such views. The descent to the fundamental is optional in the sense that we are free to focus our attention on grounding structures between non-fundamental entities. Nothing prevents us from finding satisfying and non-trivial explanations of social phenomenon in what is non-fundamental. For example, once we identify the social grounds of gender, we can stop at that level and work to change the oppressive grounds subject to our control. Those grounding connections may be significant and non-trivial insofar as they are surprising or morally and politically important in ways that fundamental grounds are not. The social ontologist can acknowledge that social reality is not fundamental, that there are further grounding connections between social reality and more fundamental facts. But those connections need not concern her. For the explanations she seeks, and rightly so, are social explanations. So we can accept that "fundamentality should be an aspect of grounding" (2015: 789), without the problematic consequences posed by Mikkola.

Mikkola also considers a very different way in which fundamentality might be connected to grounding, viz. the principle FUND:

FUND: Grounding facts, i.e., facts of the form [$\phi$ grounds $\psi$], are fundamental.

It's important to note, first, that the grounding theorist need not accept FUND in order to accept RF or AF. Second, grounding theorists have a vested interest in rejecting FUND. For FUND is thought to induce the so-called 'collapse' problem. Suppose we assume that the complete description of fundamental reality will not contain any non-fundamental notions.[30] Then, if grounding facts are fundamental, then the putatively non-fundamental entities involved in those facts are themselves fundamental. Consequently, the layers of reality would all collapse into the one fundamental layer. This would threaten the grounding enterprise altogether insofar as it aims to 'limn the structure of reality' by connecting the derivative to the more fundamental. Hence, the grounding theorist's interest in rejecting FUND is independent of social ontological concerns per se. If FUND were true, then grounding would be a poor tool for social ontologists to use because grounding would be

28 Mikkola puts these principles in terms of explanation rather than grounding, but nothing turns on this for our purposes.

29 Schaffer (forthcoming a) makes a similar point.

30 Sider (2011: 106ff.) calls this the 'Purity' principle.

a poor tool full stop. Mikkola's challenge to the grounding theorist is that she cannot reject FUND, in order to avoid collapse, in such a way that grounding is applicable to cases of social dependence (2015: 792, 798, 802). Unfortunately, Mikkola's strategy for arguing this makes it difficult to see how she could establish such a conclusion. For she only argues that deRosset's (2013) and Bennett's (2011) ways of rejecting FUND fail to square with the project of social ontologists.[31] Mikkola will have to argue that there is no good way, *in general*, for the grounding theorists to reject FUND in a way that allows for plausible accounts of social dependence. But she does not engage with any of the other ways of dealing with FUND in the literature.[32] Until that is done, I cannot see that the threat of FUND demonstrates that grounding in itself does not belong in the toolbox of social ontologists.

### *Necessitating Grounds?*

The standard view of grounding is that it is necessitating, in the following sense,

*Grounding Necessitarianism* (GN): If $\phi$ grounds $\psi$, then, necessarily, if $\phi$, then $\psi$.[33]

Grounds, in other words, are supposed to be metaphysically sufficient for that which they ground. Mikkola observes that deRosset's (2013) and Bennett's (2011) ways of rejecting FUND (mentioned above) commit them to holding that grounds ($\phi$) necessitate what they ground ($\psi$) (as well as the fact that $\phi$ grounds $\psi$) (2015: 791, 799). This seems to be the central feature of their accounts that (allegedly) makes them ill-suited for social ontology, since, "social ontological dependence relations are usually considered to be contingent" (2015: 791).[34] Even if certain cases of social construction do not involve necessitation, we need not abandon the grounding approach to social construction. GN is not unanimously endorsed by grounding theorists. Some think that there are cases of grounding in which the grounds do not necessitate the grounded item.[35] I prefer to remain neutral on whether GN is correct. Nevertheless, there seems to be a way to accommodate the cases of social construction that are allegedly contingent while endorsing GN. Schaffer (forthcoming a) notes that it is open to the grounding theorist to say that the facts typically identified as the grounds for socially constructed items are merely partial grounds for those facts. The full—and necessitating—grounds will involve the wider social (and perhaps biological) context in which the subject exists.

Including the entire social context in the grounds may be an overly coarse-grained account of the grounds for any particular identity fact, since the social context may contain factors that are not intuitively grounds for the identity fact. Moreover, grounding theorists may want to keep the wider context out of the grounds for socially constructed

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31 In the next sub-section, I'll address her central concern about their solutions.

32 Schaffer (forthcoming a) also points this out. See Fine (2012: I.11), Rosen (2010), Audi (2012: 694ff.), Dasgupta (2014), and Rabin and Rabern (forthcoming).

33 See Trogdon (2013b) for defense of GN.

34 Mikkola brings up a number of objections to deRosset's and Bennett's accounts (2015: 789–802), which I don't have the space to deal with here. But her objections are tailored to their specific accounts rather than the prospects of grounding for social ontology in general.

35 See Leuenberger (2014) and Skiles (2014). Epstein (2015: 71) affirms the grounding approach but denies GN with respect to social grounding.

items in order to secure different roles for contexts and grounds. There are a variety of options for grounding theorists on this score. It is familiar to distinguish causal 'enablers' (e.g., the presence of oxygen), which are conditions that facilitate or make possible a causal chain, from 'triggers' (e.g., the striking of the match), which directly initiate the casual chain leading to the event.[36] With respect to the grounding of socially constructed facts, we may treat contexts as enablers for the specific grounds of the constructed fact. Alternatively, Brian Epstein (2013; 2015: chp. 6) has developed a 'ground-anchor' model that allows us to identify the specific feature of the wider social context, the "anchor," that explains why some socially constructed fact is grounded in the facts that it is. At any rate, it is evident that the resources for handling these issues available to the grounding theorist are more rich and varied than Mikkola entertains.

### *Feedback Loops?*

Mikkola raises another problem for applying grounding to social facts: feedback loops. Grounding is often taken to be asymmetric, i.e., if $\phi$ grounds $\psi$, then not-($\psi$ grounds $\phi$). According to her, there are examples in the social realm in which an item $\psi$ depends on another $\phi$, but $\phi$ also depends on $\psi$. Thus, if grounding is asymmetric, then it is inapplicable to examples of symmetric dependence in the social realm. Feedback loops are familiar in social ontology. But the examples discussed typically involve *causal* relations linking entities across different times.[37] To generate a problem for the application of grounding to social reality, Mikkola needs to show that there are examples of feedback loops involving non-causal dependence. I'll argue that her example, immediately below, is not convincing:

> (1) Some pieces of paper count as money in context C *because* some group G in C has the attitude of accepting something as money towards those pieces of paper (i.e., some appropriate form of acceptance-dependence is going on). (2015: 788)

Mikkola claims that the reverse also holds:

> (1*) Some group G in C has the attitude of accepting something as money towards some pieces of paper *because* those pieces of paper count as money in context C.

One response to this example is to argue that if (1) and (1*) are both correct, then we have evidence against this being a case of grounding. A plausible explanation for the (apparent) truth of (1) and (1*) is that the connection between counting as money and being accepted as money is *identity* rather than grounding or dependence. That is, *what it is* for some pieces of money to count as money in C *is for* some group G in C to have the attitude of accepting something as money towards those pieces of paper, and vice versa. If we allow identity to back 'because' claims, then we could accept (1) and (1*) as literally true without thinking that either is a case of grounding or dependence. On the other hand,

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36 See Lombard (1990). I owe this analogy to an anonymous referee.

37 See Hacking (1999) and Mallon (2003).

we might think that (1) and (1*) are not literally true, but merely seem true because in loose, everyday talk we accept '*p* because *q*' even when *p* is identical *q*.[38]

A second response is to reject (1*). Mikkola gets this example from Hindriks (2006), who defends a principle of acceptance-dependence. He says, "Let any concept ***F*** be acceptance-dependent which satisfies the following bi-conditional *a priori*:

> [AD] *x* is *F* in context *C* ↔ group *G* in context *C* has attitude *A[F]* towards *x*" (2006: 491).

Hindriks' principle contains a bi-conditional rather than a 'because'. The presence of a bi-conditional does not indicate priority. For a bi-conditional can hold while the priority relation holds in only one direction. For example, {Socrates} exists ↔ Socrates exists. It is the case that {Socrates} exists because Socrates exists, but *not* the case that Socrates exists because {Socrates} exists. The objection to Mikkola's example, then, is that she has illicitly moved from the symmetry of the bi-conditional to the asymmetry of because. Even if she is right that (1) is an example of acceptance-dependence, there are good reasons to doubt (1*).

A third response to the example is to argue that the 'because' in (1) and (1*) have two different meanings. The 'because' in (1) is reasonably read as a non-causal 'because,' i.e., grounding. But the 'because' in (1*) is a causal 'because.' That is, members of G recognize that certain pieces of paper count as money in their context, a recognition which then *causes* them to take up certain attitudes towards those pieces of paper. It is implausible to think that it is non-causally in virtue of certain pieces of paper counting as money in C that members of G have certain attitudes towards those pieces of paper.[39]

These three objections show that Mikkola has not identified an example of symmetrical dependence in the social realm that casts doubt on the application of grounding to social phenomena.

### *Why Social Grounding? We already have Constitutive Construction!*

In her general critique of grounding, Jessica Wilson (2014) argues that once we've identified the specific metaphysical relations holding between certain items—'small-g' grounding relations, including type identity, functional realization, the part-whole relation, among others—positing a generic and primitive notion of grounding is superfluous (2014: 552ff.). Many social constructionists already recognize non-causal social construction, which they often call 'constitutive' social construction.[40] Hence, Wilson's critique may seem to apply to SCG. What I'll argue is that the most prominent account of constitutive construction, viz. Haslanger's (2003), does not render SCG superfluous because it fails to identify any specific dependence relation between the constructed item and social reality.[41]

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38 Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this second explanation.

39 Another response to Mikkola's example, suggested to me by an anonymous referee, is that it ignores a type-token discrepancy. 'Some pieces of paper' (as well as 'those pieces of paper') in (1) and (1*) is ambiguous between 'a type of piece of paper' and 'these particular (token) pieces of paper.' Mikkola would have to argue that the plausibility of (1) and (1*) does not turn on using 'some pieces of paper' in different ways.

40 See Haslanger (2006), Ásta and Haslanger (2016), Diaz-Leon (2013), and Mallon (2013).

41 N.B. I'm not arguing that this response is sufficient for answering Wilson's challenge. See my (ms.) where I take up that challenge with respect to social construction.

Here is Haslanger's account of constitutive social construction:

> *X is socially constructed constitutively as an F* iff X is of a kind or sort such that in defining what it is to be F we must make reference to social factors (or: such that in order for X to be F, X must exist within a social matrix that constitutes Fs). (2003: 318)

The operative notion of constitution here is that of certain things being used to *define* (i.e., making up a definition of) something else. So understood, it is a relation between an entity and that which figures in its definition (or perhaps its essence). What this account tells us is that X belongs to a certain social kind F, a kind whose definition involves or makes reference to social factors. What it does *not* tell us is what it is for X to be *made* F by that social reality. For the account says nothing about the specific relation of social construction holding between X's being F and X's social reality. Diaz-Leon's gloss on Haslanger's definition brings out this point nicely:

> [A]n individual or property F is *constitutively* socially constructed when it is part of the definition of what it is for someone to be an F, or part of the nature of being an F (i.e., what makes someone an F), that Fs stand in *some relation* to social agents or social factors. (second emphasis added, Diaz-Leon 2013: 1142)

The parenthetical remark in the definition adds the requirement that "X must exist within a social matrix that constitutes Fs." But this is merely a necessary condition for X's being F.[42] Again, it does not indicate what relation holds between X's being F and the relevant social factors. So even if there is a *being in the definition of* relation that holds between certain social factors and F, we still need to account for the relation of social construction. Since SCG offers such an account, it is not rendered superfluous by constitutive construction; there may still be work for big-G grounding to do.[43]

To be clear, I haven't answered Wilson's general concern here, even with respect to social construction. I've only argued that one putative candidate for the small-g relation of social construction—constitutive construction—does not supplant SCG. Perhaps another dependence notion, e.g., constitution or realization, could be used to analyze social construction.[44] Even if this can be done, it is not settled that identifying the relevant small-g relation renders the posit of big-G grounding superfluous.[45]

Not only is Haslanger's account not a competitor of SCG, there are some fascinating connections between constitutive construction and SCG to be explored. One might hold that the grounds for X's being F are the social factors involved in defining *being F*. Rosen's (2010; 2015) work on grounding and real definition could be used to support such a view. According to Rosen, if Φ is the definiens of a real definition of *being F*

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42 Mallon's (2013) account of constitutive construction also only provides a necessary condition on X's being F.

43 Cf. Rosen (2015: 198) on the superiority of grounding accounts of real definition over essentialist accounts. Thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion on this point.

44 I have in mind Pereboom's (2011) and Baker's (2007) accounts of constitution and Wilson's (1999; 2011) and Shoemaker's (2001; 2011) subset accounts of non-reductive realization on which the causal powers of the realized property are a proper subset of the causal powers of the realizing property. See my (ms.) where I argue that realization is the small-g relation operative in the social construction of social kinds. I argue that, in spite of this, big-G grounding is still needed.

45 See Cameron (forthcoming) and Schaffer (forthcoming b).

(i.e., if Φ makes up what it is to be F or is what F consists in), then for any X that is F, X's being Φ grounds X's being F. However, this approach faces a couple of obstacles. First, Rosen's view is controversial among grounding theorists because of its account of the relation between grounding and reduction.[46] Second, the social factors used to define social kinds tend to be very general, e.g., in Haslanger's view, part of what it is to be a woman is to be systematically subordinated along *some* dimension (see discussion in section 3). However, it is likely that X's being F will have more *specific* grounds than the social factors in the definition of being F, i.e., specific instances of the general social factors, e.g., being subordinated *economically*. These specific grounds may not be mentioned or included in the real definition of *being F*. To make Rosen's strategy applicable to the construction of social identities, it will be necessary to supplement it with an account of the relation between the social factors in the real definition of *being F* and the specific social factors grounding X's being F. Of course, these matters deserve further treatment, but our discussion suggests that substantive work can be done on social construction within the grounding framework.

Social construction can be analyzed in terms of grounding, or so I've argued here. The central claims and commitments of constructionists can be perspicuously characterized in the idiom of grounding. Moreover, a number of objections to the grounding analysis of social construction can be answered. Insofar as it brings together two bodies of literature that have, heretofore, not had much contact, the grounding analysis of social construction can be beneficial to both parties: to feminists (among others) who want a metaphysical framework for their theories of gender and to metaphysicians who are interested in new applications of a theory of metaphysical grounding.[47]

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46 See Audi (2012a) and Dorsey (forthcoming) for discussion of Rosen's view. Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to think about the connection between Rosen's view and Haslanger's definition.


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