

ON THE PERSISTENCE OF ABSOLUTE METAPHYSICS

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ABSTRACT: Greenwood (2019) casts doubts upon whether a certain view about social groups (the view that social groups persist throughout changes in their membership, by virtue of the maintenance of their structure or function) is a fundamental metaphysical truth about social groups, rather than a theoretical truth about some or many social groups. In this note, I introduce a distinction between absolute and relative metaphysics, and argue that there are no ‘fundamental metaphysical truths’ (as Greenwood conceives of them) at all. If there is one thing that should not persist here, it is absolute metaphysics.

KEYWORDS: John D. Greenwood, absolute metaphysics, relative metaphysics, metaphysics of social groups, metaphysical truth, theoretical truth

John D. Greenwood (2019) evaluates ‘the common view that social groups persist throughout changes in their membership, by virtue of the maintenance of their structure and/or function’ (Abstract). He argues that ‘Despite the initial plausibility of this claim, there are reasons to doubt that this is a *metaphysical truth* about social groups, rather than a *theoretical truth* about some or many social groups’ (§I, my italics). Greenwood’s argument is based on two fictional counterexamples: ‘the Mooseville College Philosophy Department’ and a motorcycle club called ‘The Ravens.’ After a brief discussion of them, with special emphasis on how the members of these groups see themselves, Greenwood concludes that ‘continuity of structure and/or function is neither sufficient nor necessary for the persistence of social groups’ (§II).

Having done that, Greenwood goes on to consider one possible objection to his argument: what the members of these groups would say about themselves might be different from what neutral observers would say. However, he remarks, ‘Two reasonable responses suggest themselves’ to such an objection:

One is that it all depends upon *theoretical explanatory considerations*, as to whether one has to appeal to compositional or structural/functional similarities or differences to explain continuities or discontinuities in earlier and later behavior. The second is that there is no fact of the matter, since *our judgment in these matters depends upon the subjective weight we place* on continuity of composition versus continuity of

structure and/or function. But neither response supports the view that it is a *fundamental metaphysical truth* that social groups persist throughout changes in their membership, or that social groups persist because of continuities of structure/function. (§II, my italics)

In this discussion note, I do not want to focus on the question of the persistence of social groups, but on the contrast that Greenwood draws between a theoretical truth and a metaphysical truth (which he also calls ‘a fundamental metaphysical truth’ [§II, just quoted] and ‘a fundamental truth about the metaphysics of social groups’ [§I]). From what we have just read, it seems clear that, for Greenwood, neither ‘theoretical explanatory considerations’ nor ‘the subjective weight we place on continuity of composition versus continuity of structure and/or function’ pertains to fundamental metaphysical truths about social groups. Thus, it appears that such truths, as Greenwood conceives of them, lie outside the scope of what can be determined by means of theoretical or subjective considerations. And this being so, we must ask ourselves: how could metaphysical truths about social groups be determined if not by reference to theoretical or subjective considerations? Indeed, how could such truths come to be known, stated, or even glimpsed if not by reference to *human* considerations of one kind or another? The answer is, of course, that they could not.

I welcome Greenwood’s doubts about the view that it is a fundamental metaphysical truth that social groups persist through changes in their membership or because of continuities of structure/function. But I would like to invite him to extend such doubts to any view about social groups – in fact, to any view whatsoever. To that end, I suggest we distinguish between ‘absolute’ (or ‘fundamental’) metaphysical claims and ‘relative’ (or ‘local’) ones. Both absolute and relative metaphysical claims concern matters of ontology, such as the repertoire of existing objects of a particular kind or the existence and persistence conditions for those objects. However, the former are meant to hold unrestrictedly, while the latter are restricted to a particular fragment of discourse at a given time. Thus, absolute metaphysical claims attempt to describe the ontology of ‘the world in itself’, while relative metaphysical claims simply address the ontology of a particular domain of knowledge at a particular point in time (or of a particular theory, viewpoint, etc). Applying this distinction, a ‘theoretical truth’ about the existence or persistence conditions of social groups within a particular theory (or with respect to our current best social science) will be regarded as a *local* metaphysical truth, that is, a metaphysical truth relative to that theory (or to our current best social science).

In Picazo (2021a, §6.5), I have elaborated on a distinction similar to that between absolute and relative metaphysics, and in (Picazo 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), I have discussed at length a major philosophical preconception (semantic Platonism) that leads to the neglect of such distinctions. On reflection, the idea that there are absolute metaphysical truths – ie metaphysical truths that transcend any human consideration – is easily seen to be untenable. Hence, the claim that social groups persist through changes in their membership (or because of continuities of structure/function) can be ruled out as a fundamental metaphysical truth, simply because there are no such truths. But we could still hold that the claim is true of our current best social science (on the basis of, among other things, theoretical explanatory considerations) or of a particular viewpoint (depending on the subjective weight we place on continuity of composition versus continuity of structure and/or function). If there is one thing that should not persist here, at least as a respectable academic endeavour, it is absolute metaphysics.¹

References

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