Norm and Object:

A Normative Hylomorphic

Theory of Social Objects

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1. Introduction

This paper is an investigation into the metaphysics of social objects such as political borders, states, and organizations. Roughly speaking, social objects are things that can be created through the performance of social acts such as agreement, decree, declaration, or the like. Despite the general interest in and practical significance of social objects, there has been relatively little work done on the metaphysics of these objects within contemporary analytic philosophy. Metaphysicians studying objects have written extensively on the metaphysics of ordinary material things such as trees, tables, and statues. Yet it is unclear whether social objects are of a kind with such ordinary material things. Philosophers working in the field of social ontology, on the other hand, have traditionally focused primarily on social and institutional facts such as the fact that two people are going for a walk together or the fact that certain pieces of paper count as money in the United States.[1] Yet social objects are not facts but things. Finally, there has been a lot of recent work on the metaphysics of social groups such as clubs, committees, teams, and courts.[2] Yet many social objects are not social groups, and it is unclear whether and to what extent the theses about social groups apply to social objects more generally. Thus, social objects as a general class have been undertheorized. This paper is part of a larger project that aspires to bring the metaphysics of social objects more to the fore in contemporary analytic metaphysics.

The paper has two main aims. The first is to articulate a metaphysical puzzle concerning a certain subclass of social objects — namely,

1. See, e.g., Gilbert (1989), Searle (1990), Tuomela (1995), and Bratman (2014) on social facts and collective intentionality. See, e.g., Searle (1995, 2010) and Thomasson (2003, 2009) on institutional facts. The topic of social and institutional objects has been broached by some social ontologists, including Quinton (1975–76), Ruben (1983, 1985: chs. 1–2), Smith (1994, 2003), Smith and Varzi (2000), Thomasson (2003, 2009), Baker (2007: ch. 3), Elder-Vass (2010: chs. 6–7), Smit, Buekens, and du Plessis (2011, 2014), Hindriks (2012, 2013), Epstein (2014, 2015), Hansson Wahlberg (2014, 2019, 2021), Smit and Buekens (2017), and Passinsky (2020).

2. See, e.g., Uzquiano (2004, 2018), Effingham (2010), Ritchie (2013, 2015, 2020), Epstein (2015: chs. 10–18, 2019), Hawley (2017), Hansson Wahlberg (2019), Thomasson (2019), and Fine (2020).

social objects of a seemingly concrete character. Examples of such social objects include physical borders such as the Roman Empire's river borders to the north and east, states with a physical territory such as the United States of America, and organizations and institutions that have a physical location such as King's College London. The basic idea behind the puzzle is that under appropriate circumstances, seemingly concrete social objects can apparently be created by acts of agreement, decree, declaration, or the like. Yet there is reason to believe that no concrete object can be created in this way.[3] This puzzle is both interesting in its own right and a testament to the fact that social objects warrant more attention from metaphysicians than they have so far received.

The second main aim is to advance a novel account of social objects that provides a satisfying solution to the puzzle and avoids the difficulties facing extant accounts. The central idea is that social objects have a normative component to them, and seemingly concrete social objects have both normative and material components. I develop this idea more rigorously using resources from the Aristotelian hylomorphic tradition. Material components, I suggest, are the 'matter' of seemingly concrete social objects and normative components are their 'form'. This normative hylomorphic account, I argue, solves the puzzle by providing a satisfying explanation of creation-by-agreement and the like: in circumstances where suitable material components already exist, new concrete social objects can be created through the creation of new rights, duties, obligations, permissions, and so on, and this may be done through the exercise of normative powers, which may take the form of an agreement.

Here is a roadmap of the paper. In section 2, I formulate the puzzle in more precise terms. In section 3, I examine existing solutions and

3. Other authors have noted that the creation of social reality through human agreement, decision, declaration, or subjective attitudes is puzzling. See, e.g., Searle (1995: 1, 2010: ix), Thomasson (2003: 269), Hansson Wahlberg (2014: 546, 2021: §§1–3), Smit and Buekens (2017: §§1–2), and Korman (2020: §3). Cf. Zimmerman (2002: 333–35) and Effingham (2010: 253) on speaking things into existence. Cf. also Passinsky (2020: §3).

review the main difficulties with them. I then articulate a number of desiderata that an alternative solution should satisfy. In section 4, I propose a normative account of social objects and indicate how such an account can solve the puzzle. I develop the details of this account in section 5, drawing on ideas in the hylomorphism literature. I then explain how the resulting normative hylomorphic theory satisfies our desiderata while also providing a satisfying solution to the puzzle. In section 6, I further develop the account in response to two challenges. I conclude, in section 7, by comparing my account with two prominent views in the social ontology literature, namely John Searle's (1995) theory of institutional facts and Katherine Ritchie's (2013, 2020) account of organized social groups.

2. The puzzle

Let us imagine that there are two people living on a desert island, Crusoe and Cassandra. One day, they decide to divvy up the island territory between themselves. They agree that River, which runs through the island, is to be the border between their respective territories. In doing so, they thereby bring into existence Border.

The creation of Border may seem unremarkable. But in fact, it is metaphysically puzzling. The puzzle may be formulated as follows:

(1) Border is a concrete object in the external world.

(2) Border is brought into existence by agreement.

(3) Agreement cannot bring into existence concrete objects in the external world.

A few remarks are in order. As I am using the term 'concrete', an object is concrete just in case it exists in space and time. A concrete object in the external world is a concrete object that is located outside of our own minds. It is also important to clarify what it means for something to be brought into existence *by* agreement. As I understand this locution, an object x is brought into existence by an act φ just in case either (i) φ constitutes the creation of x (in the way that an utterance may

constitute the making of a promise), or (ii) φ is a proximate cause of x's coming into existence (in the way that bombarding plutonium with alpha particles may be a proximate cause of some curium's coming into existence).

Each of the three premises is independently plausible, but they are jointly inconsistent. Premises (1) and (2) entail that in the envisioned scenario, a concrete object in the external world is brought into existence by agreement, but this is inconsistent with premise (3). Let us now consider the motivation for each of the premises in turn.

Premise (1) is motivated by the observation that Border appears to possess non-trivial spatial and temporal properties. Thus, for instance, Border is located on a particular desert island, where it lies between Crusoe's and Cassandra's territories. It is also the sort of thing that can be physically crossed or traversed. Furthermore, Border did not exist prior to Crusoe's and Cassandra's arrival on the island, but at a subsequent point in time, it came into existence. Thus, it appears that Border exists in space and time, in much the same way that trees, tables, and chairs exist in space and time. It follows that Border is concrete in the relevant sense. Moreover, given that Border is spatially located between Crusoe's and Cassandra's territories, it follows that Border is located outside of Crusoe's and Cassandra's minds.

The support for premise (2) is our intuitive judgment that Crusoe and Cassandra create Border by agreement. Of course, certain background conditions have to obtain in order for their agreement to be successful. Notably, River has to exist. But it would be a mistake to say that Border is created in part by the natural processes that created River. For these natural processes occurred too far in the past to be a proximate cause of Border's coming into existence. And it would be counterintuitive to suppose that these processes are partly constitutive of Border's creation, as this would entail that Border was being created before Crusoe and Cassandra even arrived on the island. So I contend that the correct description of the case is that within a certain setting, Crusoe and Cassandra create Border by (mere) agreement.

Lastly, premise (3) is supported by a metaphysical principle that says that thought and talk alone cannot bring into existence concrete objects in the external world.[4] The intuitive appeal of this principle is conveyed well by Dean Zimmerman and Nikk Effingham. Zimmerman says that many of us share a "powerful resistance to the idea that changes in our ways of talking about things, even coupled with simple changes in some of our nonverbal reactions to things, could by themselves bring any concrete physical object into existence" (2002: 335). And Effingham writes, "I think it is strange that merely speaking and intoning certain phrases could cause anything to exist. … The thought is that only wizards and warlocks can bring things into existence by merely uttering a few phrases" (2010: 253). Since an act of agreement consists of nothing more than thought and talk, it follows from this principle that agreement by itself cannot bring into existence concrete objects in the external world.

Let me now consider two initial attempts at defusing the puzzle. The first rejects the metaphysical principle that motivates premise (3) on the grounds that ready-mades are clear counterexamples to the principle. To illustrate, suppose that you find a piece of driftwood that is conveniently shaped to serve as a coffee table and you bring it home and start using it as a coffee table.[5] Have you not brought into existence a new concrete object — namely, a coffee table — by merely thinking of the driftwood as a coffee table? To my mind, this is not a clear counterexample to the principle, as it is unclear whether a new object is brought into existence in this case.[6] At least ordinarily, we would not describe this as a case of making, creating, or producing a coffee table. In contrast, we regularly use the vocabulary of creation to describe cases like that of Border — we talk of borders being established, created, and drawn, and we talk of states and universities being founded, created, formed, and established. More importantly, the

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4. Cf. Korman (2020: §3).

5. This example is discussed by Zimmerman (2002: 335) and Baker (2007: 43–44).

6. Cf. Korman (2020: §3.3).

presence of putative counterexamples to the principle does not undercut the principle's intuitive appeal, as shown by the case of Border. The intuitive appeal of the principle can only be undercut by providing a satisfying explanation of *how* thought and talk alone can bring into existence concrete objects in the external world. Thus, insofar as ready-mades are putative counterexamples to the principle, they do not defuse the puzzle but rather extend it to new cases.

The second attempt at defusing the puzzle says that it equivocates on 'concrete'. Let us say that an object is *strongly concrete* just in case it occupies a relatively determinate region of space at every time at which it exists and *weakly concrete* just in case it is located in space-time.[7] The contention, then, is that premise (1) is true if 'concrete' denotes weak concreteness but false if it denotes strong concreteness, as borders do not *occupy* regions of space in the way that ordinary material objects do. On the other hand, premise (3) is true if 'concrete' denotes strong concreteness but false if it denotes weak concreteness, as the metaphysical principle supporting premise (3) is intuitively compelling only if 'concrete' is taken to denote strong concreteness. Thus, on either way of disambiguating the puzzle, one of the premises is false. In response, let me first say that the metaphysical principle behind premise (3) seems intuitively compelling to me even if 'concrete' is taken to denote weak concreteness. But more importantly, Border does in fact occupy a region of space. While it is true that most modern-day real-world borders do not occupy regions of space, the reason for this is that this is what the relevant parties agreed to, what the authorities decreed, or what the law stipulates. We may suppose, however, that in our imaginary scenario, Crusoe and Cassandra simply agree that the river is to be the border. Given that this is the content of their agreement, Border is plausibly taken to occupy the same region of space as River. Thus, premise (1) is true even if 'concrete' denotes strong concreteness.

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7. Cf. Rosen (2017: §3.1) on these ways of characterizing the abstract/concrete distinction.

One final note regarding the setup of the puzzle: while I have formulated the puzzle using a simple imaginary case, I believe that there are many real-world cases that are puzzling in a similar way. For example, the border between Germany and Poland, which mostly follows the Oder and Neisse rivers, was the product of an agreement; the United States of America was founded with the Declaration of Independence; and King's College London was established by royal charter. Of course, in complex real-world cases such as these, the creative process usually involves more than just an agreement, decree, declaration, or the like. Nevertheless, such acts play a central and prominent creative role. This is reflected in the way in which we ordinarily think and talk about these cases — for instance, we say that the United States was founded on July 4, 1776, with the Declaration of Independence. The same intuitions that support the idea that thought and talk alone cannot bring into existence new concrete objects in the external world also support the idea that thought and talk cannot play this sort of central and prominent role in the creative process. So, I suggest, many real-world cases of the creation of social objects are puzzling in roughly the way that the creation of Border is puzzling.

3. Existing solutions

Various existing views on the ontology of social objects have the resources to solve the puzzle, in one way or another. In this section I review these existing solutions and the main difficulties with them. I do not claim that these difficulties are decisive. However, I do believe that they provide us with sufficient motivation to explore alternative solutions to the puzzle. I conclude the section by formulating a number of desiderata that an adequate alternative solution should satisfy.

3.1 Identity view
The first solution may be drawn from the following passage in John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality*:

Such material objects as are involved in institutional reality, e.g., bits of paper, are objects like any others, but the imposition of status-functions on these objects creates a level of description of the object where it is an institutional object, e.g., a twenty dollar bill. The object is no different; rather, a new status with an accompanying function has been assigned to an old object.[8] (1995: 57)

In this passage, I take Searle to be endorsing an identity view on which 'twenty dollar bill' and 'bit of paper' are just two different ways of describing one and the same object. On this view, a twenty dollar bill is numerically identical to a bit of paper. And since Searle is using the twenty dollar bill as an example to illustrate a more general view, I take him to be endorsing the identity view for social objects more generally — namely, that every token social object of a seemingly concrete character is identical to a token ordinary material object. This view can solve the puzzle by denying premise (2) on the basis of the following reasoning: River is evidently not brought into existence by agreement. But Border *just is* River. So it follows that Border is not brought into existence by agreement.

There is a well-known problem for such an identity view when it comes to ordinary material things and their constituting matter.[9] The canonical example is a statue which is molded from a lump of clay. The identity theorist says that the statue is identical to the lump of clay. Yet the lump of clay apparently existed before the statue came into existence. Moreover, it seems that the lump of clay could continue to exist if rolled into the shape of a ball, whereas the statue could not survive such a transformation. So the statue does not share all properties with the lump of clay. By Leibniz's Law, which says that *a* and *b* are identical

only if they share all properties, it follows that the statue is not identical to the lump of clay. The identity view of seemingly concrete social objects faces exactly the same problem. Consider the following: River apparently existed before Border came into existence, and it seems that River could continue to exist if all of humankind perished, whereas Border could not continue to exist in such circumstances. So Border does not share all properties with River and is therefore not identical to River.[10] The identity view of seemingly concrete social objects is no more palatable than the identity view of ordinary material objects. So those of us who reject the identity view of ordinary material objects for Leibniz's Law reasons should also reject the identity view of seemingly concrete social objects for similar reasons.

A more sophisticated sort of identity view has been put forward and discussed by Tobias Hansson Wahlberg (2014: §5).[11] This view embraces a four-dimensionalist theory of persistence according to which ordinary material objects persist through time by having different temporal parts at different times, and it identifies token social objects such as dollar bills and borders with temporal parts of token ordinary material objects (or mereological sums of such temporal parts).[12] On this view, Border may be identified with a proper temporal part of River — namely, the temporal part of River that begins to exist at the time of Crusoe and Cassandra's agreement and continues to exist until their agreement is nullified. Like the identity view considered above, this view can solve the puzzle by denying premise (2). The reasoning is as follows: Temporal parts of ordinary material objects exist regardless of anything we do, and so the temporal parts of River exist regardless

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8. Searle also writes elsewhere that "there is only one object that is both a piece of paper and a dollar bill, but the fact that it is a piece of paper is not the same fact as that it is a dollar bill, even though they are both facts about one and the same object" (2003: 302).

9. See, e.g., Wiggins (1968), Johnston (1992), Baker (1997), Thomson (1998), and Fine (2003).

10. Cf. Uzquiano (2004: §1) on the Supreme Court, Hindriks (2013: 419) on organizations, Ritchie (2013: §§2–4) on social groups, Hansson Wahlberg (2014: 545–46) on governments, and Korman (2020: §2.1) on stores.

11. Hansson Wahlberg does not endorse this view but offers it up as a more promising alternative for those who wish to identify token institutional objects with token material objects.

12. Social objects such as states, governments, and universities require a more nuanced treatment. These objects may be identified with mereological sums of temporal parts of mereological sums of token ordinary material objects.

of anything we do. But Border *just is* a temporal part of River. So it follows that Border exists regardless of anything we do and is therefore not brought into existence by human agreement.

This sophisticated identity view avoids the problem from Leibniz's Law in the case of temporal properties. For the temporal part of River with which Border is identified comes into and goes out of existence when Border does. Furthermore, it may be argued that the view can appeal to Lewisian counterpart theory to deal with the problem from Leibniz's Law in the case of modal properties.[13] But even so, the view would still run into trouble when it comes to other sorts of properties.[14] For example, Border may be just or unjust, legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair. But neither River nor its temporal parts possess any such properties. They are not the *sorts* of things that can be just or unjust, legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair.[15] Thus, even the sophisticated identity view is unable to entirely avoid the problem from Leibniz's Law.

3.2 Immaterialism

Other authors in the social ontology literature maintain that at least some social objects are abstract. For instance, Barry Smith suggests that some borders and air traffic corridors are abstract (2003: 290–91), and Amie Thomasson contends that laws, governments, and corporations are abstract (2003: 282–83).[16] Smith and Thomasson themselves do not take seemingly concrete social objects such as river borders to

13. Cf. Hansson Wahlberg (2014: 553, n. 51).

14. Cf. Fine (2003: §3) on the apparent divergence of various non-temporal and non-modal properties in the case of the statue and the lump of clay.

15. Note that this problem also plagues a four-dimensionalist view that identifies Border with an instantaneous temporal part (i.e., a 'stage') of River, since an instantaneous temporal part of River is not the sort of thing that can be just or unjust, legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair. See Hansson Wahlberg (2014: §5) for a discussion of the stage view of institutional objects and its advantages over the more standard four-dimensionalist view discussed above. See also Faller (2021) for a defense of the stage view of social groups.

16. In his later work, Searle also countenances certain abstract social objects, including corporations and electronic money. See Searle (2010: ch. 5).

be abstract. Nevertheless, their view might be extended to this class of social objects. The resulting immaterialist view could then solve our puzzle by denying premise (1) on the grounds that Border is abstract rather than concrete. The obvious difficulty is that on this view, it is not the case that Border exists in both space and time. Yet Border appears to possess non-trivial spatial and temporal properties, which suggests that it *does* exist in both space and time.

Daniel Korman has recently proposed a version of immaterialism that speaks to this difficulty (2020: §4.1, §5.1). On his view, seemingly concrete social objects such as restaurants, stores, universities, and states are fundamentally of a kind with abstract artifacts such as poems and novels. Both kinds of objects are immaterial, but they have material manifestations. Thus, for example, the novel *Anna Karenina* is an immaterial object whose material manifestations are its physical copies. Similarly, the United States of America is an immaterial object whose material manifestations are its particular tokens, instances, or what have you. A proponent of this immaterialist view may contend that Border is an immaterial object which inherits certain spatial and temporal properties from its material manifestation, River.[17] Border is thus both immaterial and concrete in the relevant sense (i.e., it exists in both space and time).[18] This view could solve the puzzle by denying premise (3) on the grounds that agreement *can* bring into existence certain concrete objects in the external world, namely immaterial objects that have material manifestations.

Even supposing that we can make sense of the idea that immaterial things can exist in both space and time,[19] the proposed assimilation of seemingly concrete social objects to abstract artifacts such as poems and novels is problematic. Poems and novels can have multiple material manifestations at a single time. For example, there can be multiple

17. Cf. Liebesman and Magidor (2017: §3) on property inheritance in the case of informational and physical books.

18. Cf. Korman (2020: 445).

19. Some would argue that being spatially located is definitive of materiality, and so we cannot make sense of this idea. See, e.g., Markosian (2000).

physical copies of *Anna Karenina* at a given time. This motivates the view that *Anna Karenina* is an immaterial type (or kind) that has concrete tokens (or instances). In contrast, seemingly concrete social objects do not seem capable of having multiple material manifestations at a single time. Thus, for example, at present there is only one material manifestation of the United States of America, and it is difficult to imagine a possible scenario in which another material manifestation comes into being. Even if the United States were to acquire territory on the other side of the world or on another planet, this territory would just become part and parcel of the one and only material manifestation of the United States. It would not constitute a distinct 'copy' of the United States. Thus, unlike poems and novels, seemingly concrete social objects are not plausibly taken to be immaterial types (or kinds) that have concrete tokens (or instances).

3.3 Eliminativism

A different solution to the puzzle is suggested by another one of Searle's remarks. "What we think of as social objects, such as governments, money, and universities, are in fact just placeholders for patterns of activities," he writes (1995: 57). The suggestion here seems to be that terms such as 'government', 'money', and 'university', which appear to refer to social objects, are in fact serving as 'placeholders' for patterns of human activities because there are no social objects for these terms to refer to. Such an eliminativist view, which refuses to countenance social objects, solves the puzzle by denying premises (1) and (2) on the grounds that Border does not exist, and so *a fortiori* it is not a concrete object in the external world and it is not brought into existence by agreement.

There is a familiar problem with eliminativism when it comes to ordinary material things: the view conflicts with what we ordinarily believe.[20] For our ordinary belief is that there are such things as tables, chairs, and statues. The eliminativist view of social objects faces

20. See Korman (2009, 2015: ch. 4).

exactly the same problem. For our ordinary belief is that there are such things as borders, states, and universities. Those of us who reject the eliminativist view of ordinary material things because of the conflict with ordinary belief should likewise reject the eliminativist view of social objects.

Hansson Wahlberg has recently proposed an interesting variant on the eliminativist view of social objects. Concerning the case of a corporation seemingly created by declaration, he writes:

> I think the idea that an object is literally created [by declaration] needs to be avoided … a declaration to the effect that a corporation exists is made, and because of this declaration it becomes true to *say*, in a tensed language and within a suitable reference frame, "A corporation, founded in such and such a way, exists." The truth-maker for such an existential assertion, however, should not be taken to be a new, ontic, institutional object that is somehow brought into existence in the world …. Rather, the truth-maker (or truth-makers) should be assumed to consist simply of the declaration itself, together with representations of the relevant legal regulation. (2021: 5853, emphasis in original)

As I understand the proposal, corporations do not *really* exist.[21] Nevertheless, according to the proposal, in the context of ordinary discourse it is true to say things such as "Google exists" and "Google was brought into existence by declaration" because the truthmakers for such ordinary statements are just the relevant declarations together with representations of the relevant legal regulation. Yet if these statements are true, then it would seem to follow by Tarski's T-schema that Google exists and that Google was brought into existence by declaration. Thus, I take it that on the most plausible construal of this proposal,

21. Cf. Hansson Wahlberg's remarks to the effect that such objects do not exist "in a worldly sense" (2021: 5856) or as "ontic" or "worldly" entities (2021: 5853, 5857).

corporations do exist in *some* sense. Let us say that they *exist$_{ord}$* (exist in the ordinary 'lightweight' sense), but they do not *exist$_{ont}$* (exist in the ontological 'heavyweight' sense).[22]

This truthmaker view of social objects does not conflict with ordinary belief because it countenances the existence$_{ord}$ of things such as borders, states, and universities. At the same time, it provides a novel solution to the puzzle, namely that it equivocates on 'existence': Premise (2) is true if 'existence' denotes existence$_{ord}$ but false if it denotes existence$_{ont}$, as Border is brought into existence$_{ord}$ by agreement, but it is not brought into existence$_{ont}$ by agreement. On the other hand, premise (3) is true if 'existence' denotes existence$_{ont}$ but false if it denotes existence$_{ord}$, as agreement cannot bring into existence$_{ont}$ concrete objects in the external world but it can bring such objects into existence$_{ord}$. Thus, on either way of disambiguating the puzzle, one of the premises is false.

I am in considerable agreement with this solution. Granted that there is a viable distinction between existence in the ordinary sense and existence in the ontological sense, I agree that on the ontological reading of the puzzle, premise (2) is plausibly rejected. For the intuitive judgment that supports premise (2) concerns the ordinary sense of existence as opposed to some heavyweight ontological sense. Thus, I think that the puzzle should be given its ordinary reading. Furthermore, I agree that on the ordinary reading, premise (3) should ultimately be rejected. However, I take it that a solution which rejects premise (3) is fully satisfying only insofar as it provides a satisfying explanation of how agreement can bring into existence new concrete objects in the external world. In particular, it should provide an account of what concrete social objects *are*, which elucidates why these things can be brought into existence by agreement and the like. The truthmaker view does not provide such an account, as its focus is on

ordinary statements about social objects rather than the objects themselves.[23] Thus, the view on its own does not provide a fully satisfying solution to the puzzle.

3.4 *The desiderata*

In light of the preceding discussion, let us now articulate a number of desiderata for an alternative solution to the puzzle. To avoid the difficulties faced by the identity views, the immaterialist views, and the eliminativist view, an alternative solution should satisfy the following three desiderata:

> (i) *Existence*: The existence of Border is countenanced.
>
> (ii) *Non-identity*: Border is not taken to be identical to River (or a temporal part of River).
>
> (iii) *Materiality*: A material aspect to Border is countenanced.

In addition, insofar as the solution rejects premise (3), it should provide a satisfying explanation of how Border is brought into existence by agreement. I turn now to the task of developing a solution that satisfies these desiderata.

4. A normative account

My basic proposal is that social objects have a normative component to them. Thus, their existence is partly a normative matter — namely, a matter of the existence of rights, duties, obligations, permissions, requirements, prohibitions, or the like.[24] The seemingly concrete social

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22. On one prominent way of developing this idea, the ordinary English quantifier is semantically associated with a different domain than the metaphysically privileged quantifier which 'carves nature at its joints'. See Dorr (2005: §7). Cf. also Chalmers (2009: 95–96), Sider (2009: 411–16), and Cameron (2010: 255–56) on the idea that there are different quantifiers.

23. The truthmaker theorist might resist the demand to provide such an account on the grounds that concrete social objects do not exist$_{ont}$ in her view. Yet it is very plausible to suppose that if an object exists in any sense whatsoever, then there is something that it is to be that object. Given that concrete social objects exist$_{ord}$ on the truthmaker view, it follows that we can legitimately ask what these objects are.

24. Many philosophers working on social ontology have suggested that various social entities be understood in normative terms, and I take my proposal to be broadly in line with this approach to social reality. See, e.g., Searle (1995)

objects that are of special interest to us have both normative and material components to them. So their existence is partly a normative matter and partly a matter of the existence of concrete material things. Consider Border. We may take its material component to be River and its normative components to involve the new obligations or permissions that are in effect as a result of Crusoe and Cassandra's agreement (e.g., the obligation to not cross River without the other person's consent). The existence of Border is partly a matter of the existence of River and partly a matter of the existence of these obligations or permissions.

An important question to address before proceeding is whether the relevant kind of normativity is moral, legal, or merely social. That is, are the rights, duties, obligations, permissions, requirements, prohibitions, and the like which figure in the normative components of social objects moral, legal, or merely social in character? I endorse a pluralistic view according to which the relevant rights, duties, obligations, and so on may be ones of conventional morality or political morality, the law, or prescribed or practiced social norms or rules.[25] On this pluralistic view, some social objects may have a moral nature, others may have a legal or merely social nature, and still others may have a hybrid nature.[26]

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on status functions entailing deontic powers, Witt (2011) on gender as a mega social role that is associated with a set of social norms, Ásta (2018) on social properties of individuals as social statuses consisting in behavioral constraints and enablements, and Thomasson (2019) on the normativity of many of our social group concepts.

25. For some representative accounts of social norms and rules, see Hart (1961/2012: ch. 4, §1), Bicchieri (2006: ch. 1), and Pettit (2008: §1). For our purposes here, we need not adjudicate between these different characterizations of social norms and rules.

26. I leave open the possibility that there are other kinds of objects that have normative components involving other kinds of normativity (e.g., natural normativity tied to biological function). Such objects, however, would not be *social* objects in my view. I take it that the distinguishing characteristic of social objects is that they have normative components which involve conventional morality or political morality, the law, or prescribed or practiced social norms or rules.

Let us now consider how the normative account of seemingly concrete social objects provides a solution to our puzzle. The normative account denies premise (3), which says that agreement cannot bring into existence concrete objects in the external world. It does so on the basis of the following reasoning: It is a consequence of the normative account that in circumstances where suitable material components already exist, a new concrete social object can be brought into existence through the creation of new rights, duties, obligations, permissions, or the like. These, in turn, can be created through the exercise of normative powers, with agreement being one form that such an exercise can take.

Normative powers are roughly powers to change the normative situation of oneself or others through mere say-so or through some other verbal or written act undertaken with the intention of effecting a normative change.[27] Paradigm examples include the power of individuals to create new legal rights and obligations by drawing up a will or contract, the power of legitimate political authorities to create duties by decree or declaration, and the power of individuals to obligate themselves by making a promise or vow. While these paradigm examples concern the moral and legal domains, I take it that normative powers can also affect social norms and rules. Thus, for example, an authority on etiquette can create new social obligations by making a pronouncement on proper table manners, and a de facto political authority (even if illegitimate) can impose new behavioral constraints on members of the population by decree. As demonstrated by these various examples, an exercise of normative powers can take many different forms, including that of agreement.

By appealing to the phenomenon of normative powers, the normative account is able to provide a satisfying explanation of how agreement can bring into existence new concrete objects in the external

27. Numerous authors have attempted to give a more precise characterization of normative powers or related phenomena. See Raz (1972: 94–96, 1999: 98–104) on normative powers, Hart (1982) on legal powers, Enoch (2011: §4.4) on robust reason-giving, and Perry (2013: 25) on moral powers.

world. More generally, it is able to explain how mere thought and talk can create such objects: certain mental-linguistic acts can constitute an exercise of normative powers, and an appropriate exercise of normative powers can create a new concrete social object in circumstances where suitable material components already exist.[28]

One might worry that the normative account of social objects merely trades in one metaphysical mystery for another. At least insofar as rights, duties, and so forth are objective things that are part of the normative fabric of the world, it seems mysterious that we should have the power to create such things out of thin air, through our mere say-so.[29] But normative powers are not posits of the normative account of social objects. We clearly have such powers. And so the metaphysical mystery surrounding them is a mystery that everyone must contend with. Furthermore, there are viable proposals in the literature for how to resolve this mystery.[30] Thus, the normative account of social objects does not leave us with a new and unresolvable metaphysical mystery concerning normative powers.

28. It may be thought that the proposed explanation is circular because the normative components of social objects might themselves involve normative powers (e.g., the normative components of legislatures might involve legal powers to create new laws). But in such cases, the social object is not created through the exercise of those very normative powers which figure in its normative components. Rather, it is created through the exercise of some other normative powers. Thus, there is no circularity. Provided that we recognize the existence of some basic normative powers which are not themselves created through the exercise of other normative powers (cf. Raz 2019: §2), there is also no explanatory regress.

29. Cf. Hume (*Treatise of Human Nature* 3.2.5) and Enoch (2011: 1, 2014: 296).

30. See especially Enoch (2011: §4.1, 2014: §3). Enoch suggests that any case of robust reason-giving is really a case of the triggering of a pre-existing conditional reason. This suggestion might dissolve the metaphysical mystery surrounding moral powers. See also Enoch's discussion of the 'Constitutive Model' (2011: §4.2). Enoch rejects this model in cases of robust reason-giving, but the model might be applicable to some of the normative powers we are interested in, e.g., powers affecting prescribed social rules.

5. Normative hylomorphism

Thus far, I have proposed that concrete social objects have both normative and material components to them. In order for this proposal to constitute more than a mere sketch, three main questions need to be addressed. First, what exactly are the material components of concrete social objects? Second, what exactly are their normative components? And third, in exactly what sense are both of these *components* of concrete social objects? In this section, I develop my initial proposal into a more full-fledged hylomorphic theory of concrete social objects, through a consideration of these questions. I then explain how the theory is able to solve the puzzle while also satisfying our desiderata.

5.1 Material components

Let us begin with the question of material components. In the simple imaginary case of Border, there is one material component and it is an ordinary material object, namely a river. Historically, many real-world borders and boundaries likewise had ordinary material objects such as rivers or mountain ranges as their material components. Some other kinds of concrete social objects also have ordinary material objects as their material components. These include pieces of money, credit cards, and official documents such as passports and driver's licenses. Thus, for example, we may take the material component of a U.S. dollar bill to be a piece of paper with an inscription on it, and the material component of a credit card to be a piece of plastic with writing on it.

Many other concrete social objects have people as their material components. This is the case for social groups such as clubs, teams, and committees. Thus, for example, the material components of the graduate admissions committee are the individual members of this committee. While social groups are the most salient kind of concrete social objects with people as material components, they are not the only such kind. Married couples, for instance, also have people as their material components. There may even be some concrete social

objects with only one person as a material component — for instance, the owner of a sole proprietorship may be its only material component.

There are some concrete social objects whose material components are neither ordinary material objects nor people. Consider, for example, the border between Vermont and New Hampshire, which lies along the west bank of the Connecticut River. Unlike in the imaginary case of Border, it would be implausible to suppose that the material component of the Vermont–New Hampshire border is a certain river, namely the Connecticut River. For the Vermont–New Hampshire border and the Connecticut River have different locations. The river lies to the east of the border and thus belongs to New Hampshire. Nor can we take the material component to be the west bank of the Connecticut River, where the west bank is construed as a certain portion of land. For this portion of land would have a height and volume, whereas the border does not have a height or volume. I suggest that we instead take the material component of the Vermont–New Hampshire border to be a certain line in space. More generally, I suggest that the material components of some concrete social objects are 'quasi-material objects', which are objects that are spatially located but do not *occupy* space in the way that ordinary material objects do. Examples of quasi-material objects include lines in space, planes in space, and perhaps regions of space. Lines in space may serve as the material components of modern-day political borders, planes in space as the material components of airspace boundaries, and regions of space as the material components of domestic airspace.

A further difficult case is institutions consisting of other institutions. An example is the United States Congress, which consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate. It may be thought that the material components of the United States Congress are the U.S. representatives and U.S. senators (perhaps along with the Capitol building). Yet it is hard to see how such a view could account for the apparent fact that the United States Congress *consists* of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The way around this difficulty is to allow for concrete social objects themselves to be material components of other

concrete social objects. We may then take the material components of the United States Congress to be the House of Representatives and the Senate. Other institutions, organizations, social groups, and political entities consisting of other such entities may likewise be taken to have concrete social objects as their material components. For example, we may take the material components of the United States of America to be the fifty U.S. states.

My final proposal, then, is that any material component of a concrete social object belongs to one of the following four categories: (i) ordinary material object, (ii) person, (iii) quasi-material object, or (iv) concrete social object. Note that the various material components of a given concrete social object may belong to different categories. For example, the material components of universities are plausibly taken to include both persons (e.g., students and faculty) and ordinary material objects (e.g., libraries and lecture halls). Moreover, whereas some concrete social objects cannot change their material components over time, others can. For example, a particular U.S. dollar bill cannot come to have a different piece of paper as its material component, and a married couple cannot come to have different people as its material components. In contrast, a committee can come to have different individuals as its material components, and a political border can come to have a different line in space as its material component.

5.2 Normative components

Let us now turn to the question of normative components. To elucidate the nature of normative components, I will draw on an idea in the Aristotelian hylomorphic tradition. Hylomorphists maintain that objects are to be understood in terms of both matter and form. The basic idea may be illustrated with the simple example of an H_2O molecule. Its matter is two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom, and its form involves a certain chemical arrangement that is exhibited by the atoms, namely that of being chemically bonded in the appropriate way. A central challenge for hylomorphism is to clarify what exactly form

is, in a way that makes it unmysterious and palatable.[31] One prominent alternative, which has been embraced by a number of contemporary hylomorphists including Kit Fine (1982, 1999) and Mark Johnston (2006), says that properties and relations may play the role of form.[32] Drawing on this idea, I propose that we take the normative components of concrete social objects to be normative properties and relations. This is an attractive way of construing normative components because normative properties and relations are relatively familiar entities, which many contemporary metaphysicians already countenance in their ontology.

In the case of concrete social objects with only one material component, the normative components are relational normative properties of the form 'being normatively related thus-and-so to such-and-such'. For example, the normative component of the Vermont–New Hampshire border may be taken to be the relational normative property *being such that Vermont has legal jurisdiction over the geographical area to the west of it and New Hampshire has legal jurisdiction over the geographical area to the east of it*. And the normative component of U.S. dollar bills may be taken to be a relational normative property such as *being such that persons in the United States have the legal right to repay public or private debts in the United States with it*.

In the case of concrete social objects with more than one material component, the normative components are intrinsic or extrinsic normative relations. An intrinsic normative relation is a normative relation that n things stand in entirely in virtue of how they are normatively related to each other. Such relations have the form 'being normatively related thus-and-so to each other'. Consider, for example, married couples. Insofar as we construe marriage as a moral phenomenon that goes beyond the law, we may take the normative components of married couples to include the intrinsic normative relation

31. For a nice survey of the different accounts on offer, see Koslicki (2018: §3.2).

32. On Fine's (1999) theory, properties and relations play the role of form in the case of rigid embodiments, whereas functions play the role of form in the case of variable embodiments.

being morally obligated to support in sickness and in health. An extrinsic normative relation, on the other hand, is a normative relation that n things stand in partly in virtue of how they are normatively related to other things outside of them. Such relations have the form 'being normatively related thus-and-so to each other and such-and-such'. Consider, for example, the graduate admissions committee. We may take its normative component to be the extrinsic normative relation *together having the power to admit graduate students*. Note that the normative components of some concrete social objects may include both intrinsic and extrinsic normative relations. A plausible example is the United States Congress. Its normative components may include certain fundamental legal relations that hold between the House and the Senate as well as certain legal relations that relate the House and the Senate to the other branches of government.

To summarize my proposal, any normative component of a concrete social object belongs to one of the following three categories: (i) relational normative property, (ii) intrinsic normative relation, or (iii) extrinsic normative relation. Concrete social objects with only one material component have normative components belonging to the first category, whereas those with more than one material component have normative components belonging to the second or third categories. Unlike in the case of material components, I take it that no concrete social object can change its normative components over time.[33] However, since properties and relations can be realized in different ways, my view still allows for concrete social objects to change the specific ways in which their normative components are realized over time. Thus, for example, the view allows for the possibility that

33. In my view, any concrete social object x essentially belongs to some kind K, which is essentially associated with some particular set of normative components (see §5.3). Thus, any concrete social object x is essentially associated with some particular set of normative components. It follows that no concrete social object can change its normative components over time. Such a change would mean that the object is associated with one set of normative components at one time and a different set of these components at a later time. But this cannot happen, since the object is essentially associated with a particular set of normative components.

the normative component of the graduate admissions committee is re-
alized at one time by the relation *together having the power to admit mas-
ter's students*, while at another time it is realized by the relation *together
having the power to admit master's and PhD students*. In this way, the view
is able to account for cases in which a given concrete social object ap-
pears to undergo some change in its normative profile over time.

5.3 Material-normative compounds

I have now provided an account of the material and normative compo-
nents of concrete social objects. But in what sense, exactly, are these
components? In other words, in what sense are concrete social objects
'made up' of these entities? To answer this question, I will draw on
another idea that has been espoused by some contemporary hylomor-
phists, including Kit Fine (1999) and Kathrin Koslicki (2008: ch. 7). The
idea is that matter and form are literally proper parts of matter-form
compounds. A simple application of this idea to our earlier example of
an H_2O molecule would have it that the proper parts of this molecule
include two hydrogen atoms, an oxygen atom, and a certain chemical
arrangement that is exhibited by these atoms. Along similar lines, I
suggest that the material components ('matter') and normative com-
ponents ('form') of concrete social objects are literally proper parts of
these objects.[34] These parts come together to form a compound whole
when the material components instantiate the normative components.
It is in this straightforward sense that concrete social objects are 'made
up' of their material and normative components.

It is important to note that on this proposal, a concrete social object
is not a mereological sum of its material and normative components.
If there is a mereological sum of these components, then it exists

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34. Given that proper parthood is transitive, a concrete social object will typically
    have further proper parts in addition to its material and normative compo-
    nents. Thus, for example, the proper parts of a U.S. dollar bill will include not
    only a piece of paper and a certain relational normative property but also the
    proper parts of the piece of paper. These further proper parts, however, are
    not further components of the U.S. dollar bill in the intended sense. We may
    think of a concrete social object's material and normative components as its
    'immediate' or 'direct' proper parts.

whenever the components exist.[35] But on the present proposal, a con-
crete social object exists only when its material components *instantiate*
its normative components. And all of these components might exist
without the former instantiating the latter.

Concrete social objects are wholes of a different kind. Let us call
these wholes *material-normative compounds*. I will assume that any
material-normative compound x essentially belongs to some material-
normative kind K (e.g., *border*, *money*, *state*, *committee*, *university*) and
that any material-normative kind K is essentially associated with a
set of normative components and a range of suitable material com-
ponents.[36] The range of suitable material components will generally
depend upon the function associated with kind K. Thus, for example,
since the function of a border is to demarcate a territory, the range of
suitable material components associated with the kind *border* includes
all of the things that are suitable for serving this function (e.g., rivers,
mountain ranges, lines in space, etc.). The following principle, then,
tells us when a material-normative compound x of kind K exists:

> EXISTENCE: A material-normative compound x of kind K,
> associated with normative components $R_1,\ldots, R_n$ and a
> range of suitable material components, exists at a time t if
> and only if (i) there exist some suitable material compo-
> nents $m_1,\ldots, m_k$ which are the material components of x at
> t; and (ii) $m_1,\ldots, m_k$ stand in relations $R_1,\ldots, R_n$ at t.[37]

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35. I wish to remain neutral on whether there are such sums. The important point
    for our purposes is that no concrete social object is identical to such a sum,
    even if such sums exist.

36. Here I draw on aspects of Koslicki's approach. Koslicki presupposes an ontol-
    ogy of kinds and associates each kind with a set of formal components (2008:
    ch. 7). I believe that my presupposed ontology of material-normative kinds
    accords well with both common sense and classifications in the social sci-
    ences. That being said, a full defense of this ontology of material-normative
    kinds is beyond the scope of the present paper.

37. Note that $R_1,\ldots, R_n$ are relational properties if there is only one material compo-
    nent and multi-place relations if there is more than one material component.

And at any time t at which a material-normative compound x of kind K exists, it satisfies the following principle of parthood:

> Parthood: (i) Each material component of x at t is a part of x at t; and (ii) each of the normative components associated with kind K is a part of x.

It may be thought that Parthood has unacceptable consequences when it comes to the location of material-normative compounds. It seems plausible to suppose that at any time t at which an object exists, it is located wherever its parts at t are located. Call this the *parthood-location link*. It follows from Parthood and the parthood-location link that at any time t at which a material-normative compound x of kind K exists, it is partly located wherever the normative components associated with kind K are located. This arguably leads to counterintuitive results when these components include relational properties or extrinsic relations. Consider, for example, U.S. dollar bills. Let us suppose that the relevant relational normative properties include *being such that persons in the United States have the legal right to repay public or private debts in the United States with it*. Since this property involves persons in the United States, it is arguably partly located wherever persons in the United States are located. But then it follows that the dollar bill in my wallet is partly located where, for instance, Barack Obama is located. Yet this is absurd. This consequence can be avoided by adopting the widely held view that relations (and relational properties) are not located in space and time (and do not have parts which are located in space and time).[38] As Bertrand Russell famously put it, relations are "nowhere and nowhen" (1912/2001: 56). Given this view of relations, the normative components associated with kind K make a null contribution to x's spatiotemporal location. Thus, the relational normative property *being such that persons in the United States have the*

legal right to repay public or private debts in the United States with it* makes a null contribution to the location of the dollar bill, and so we avoid the absurd result that the dollar bill is partly located where Obama is located.

This brings us to my preferred principle of location for material-normative compounds such as dollar bills and borders, whose material components include only ordinary material objects and/or quasi-material objects. At any time t at which such a material-normative compound x of kind K exists, it satisfies the following location principle:

> Location: x is located at t wherever its material components at t are located.

There are special difficulties concerning the location of material-normative compounds such as organizations and universities, whose material components typically include persons and/or concrete social objects.[39] As the restricted location principle proposed above suffices for the purposes of solving our puzzle, I will not attempt to state principles of location for these more difficult and controversial cases here.

5.4 The normative hylomorphic solution
With these three principles in hand, we can now articulate precisely how the normative hylomorphic view of concrete social objects

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38. On this widely held view, relations (and relational properties) are not located in a Platonic heaven. Rather, these entities simply lack a location (cf. Balaguer 2016: §1). Thus, we are not left with the consequence that the dollar bill is partly located in a Platonic heaven.

39. Consider, for example, Dartmouth College. Its material components are plausibly taken to include its faculty and students as well as various ordinary material objects, such as buildings. Yet the college need not be located where its faculty and students are located. When some of its students go to Florida for spring break, the college does not become partly located in Florida. It remains wholly located in Hanover, NH. Thus, the location of Dartmouth College is not given by the location principle proposed above. Note that this location problem is not specific to my theory of material-normative compounds. The problem arises for any view on which the members of an organization are parts of that organization. For further discussion of the problem, see Ruben (1983, 1985: chs. 1–2), Hindriks (2013), Hawley (2017: §6), and Fine (2020: §1). A solution along the lines proposed by Fine could be adapted to our own framework. Roughly, the idea would be that a material-normative compound such as Dartmouth College inherits the location of only some of its material components (e.g., its buildings, its lawns, etc.).

provides a satisfying solution to our puzzle while also satisfying the desiderata of *Existence*, *Non-identity*, and *Materiality*.

Let us begin with the desiderata. Existence ensures that *Existence* is satisfied. Immediately after Crusoe and Cassandra's agreement, there is a suitable material component (viz., River) which is the material component of Border and has the relational normative properties associated with the kind *border*. It follows from Existence that Border exists at this time. *Non-identity* is secured by the second clause of Parthood. According to this clause, the relevant relational normative properties are parts of Border. Yet these relational normative properties are not parts of River. Since Border and River have different parts, they are numerically distinct objects (by similar reasoning, Border is distinct from any temporal part of River). Finally, *Materiality* is secured by the first clause of Parthood. According to this clause, following Crusoe and Cassandra's agreement, River is a part of Border. Since River is a material object, it follows that Border has a material part.

Let us now turn to the normative hylomorphic solution to the puzzle. It follows from Existence that in circumstances where certain suitable material components already exist, a new material-normative compound *x* of kind *K* can be brought into existence by making it the case that these material components instantiate the normative components associated with *K*. But the instantiation of such components (viz., relational normative properties or normative relations) is just a matter of certain agents having certain rights, duties, obligations, permissions, powers, or the like. And we can bring this about through the exercise of normative powers, with agreement being one form that such an exercise can take. Agreement can thus bring into existence new material-normative compounds. By Location, at least some such compounds are located wherever their material components are located, and so they are concrete objects in the external world. It follows that agreement can bring into existence concrete objects in the external world, contra premise (3) of the puzzle.

In addition to explaining creation-by-agreement and the like, the normative hylomorphic view can also *explain away* the intuitive

appeal of the metaphysical principle motivating premise (3), namely the principle which says that thought and talk alone cannot bring into existence concrete objects in the external world. For while the normative hylomorphic view is incompatible with this principle, it is nevertheless compatible with a closely related principle which says that thought and talk alone cannot bring into existence concrete objects in the external world *ex nihilo*. It is compatible with this qualified principle because on the normative hylomorphic view, thought and talk alone can only create new material-normative compounds from suitable pre-existing material components. The normative hylomorphist may therefore maintain that the initial intuitive appeal of the unqualified principle stems from a failure to properly distinguish between these two closely related — but importantly different — principles.

6. Further developments

I will now consider two potential challenges that may be raised for the proposed normative hylomorphic theory and indicate how the theory may be further developed in response to these challenges.

6.1 Property divergence

The first challenge concerns property divergence. By Location, Border and River are spatially coincident objects. Typically, spatially coincident objects share a wide range of properties in common, especially spatial and physical properties. Thus, for example, a statue and the clay from which it is made share the same location, size, weight, shape, and volume. Yet there seems to be a significant divergence in the spatial and physical properties of Border and River. For instance, River has a determinate temperature, but it seems weird to ascribe any temperature to Border. A statement such as "Border is fifty degrees Fahrenheit today" strikes us as odd. Furthermore, suppose that River is full of fish. It seems odd to attribute this property to Border. The challenge, then, is to explain (or explain away) this apparent divergence in the spatial and physical properties of Border and River, when there is no similar divergence in the case of the statue and the clay.

I would like to suggest that the apparent divergence in spatial and physical properties is *merely* apparent and that, in fact, Border and River do share their spatial and physical properties in common. The oddity of saying that Border is fifty degrees Fahrenheit or that Border is full of fish can be explained away as follows. First, as I suggested earlier, modern-day real-world borders are plausibly taken to have lines in space rather than ordinary material objects as their material components. Lines in space do not instantiate properties such as *being fifty degrees Fahrenheit* or *being full of fish* and neither do these real-world borders. Statements such as "Border is fifty degrees Fahrenheit today" and "Border is full of fish" may strike us as odd simply because the borders that we are most familiar with do not have such properties, and so we are accustomed to thinking of borders in general as not having such properties.

Furthermore, there is a pragmatic explanation of the oddity of these statements. From a practical standpoint, social objects are of interest and concern to us in large part because of the functions they serve. For example, dollar bills are of practical interest and concern to us because they function as a medium of exchange, store of value, and unit of account. This practical interest is reflected in our ordinary thought and talk about concrete social objects. Typically, we do not concern ourselves with those spatial and physical properties of concrete social objects which are altogether irrelevant to the fulfillment of the object's function. Thus, we typically do not concern ourselves with the temperature or the animal inhabitation of river borders, since these properties are irrelevant to the fulfillment of the function of demarcating a territory. This explains why the statements in question may strike us as odd, even when they are true.[40]

40. Note that the identity theorist cannot deploy similar reasoning to explain away the apparent divergence in the normative properties of Border and River (discussed in §3.1). For natural objects like rivers are oftentimes of practical interest and concern to us precisely because of the roles they play in our culture, society, politics, or religion. For example, the Ganges River in India is sacred to Hindus and is therefore of great practical interest and concern to many. Provided that normative properties are at least somewhat relevant

6.2 Immaterial social objects

The second challenge for the proposed normative hylomorphic theory concerns immaterial social objects. Consider, for example, tokens of digital currencies such as bitcoin. A particular bitcoin is not associated with a particular piece of hardware in the way that a particular dollar bill is associated with a particular piece of paper. Thus, unlike a dollar bill, a bitcoin does not appear to have a material component to it. The U.S. Constitution, the speed limit on Highway 1 in California, and the online store Etsy are further examples of social objects that appear to lack material components. The challenge for the normative hylomorphist is to show how the theory developed thus far may be extended to account for such immaterial or abstract social objects.[41]

I propose to meet this challenge by countenancing *immaterial-normative compounds* in addition to material-normative compounds. Immaterial-normative compounds have normative properties or relations as their normative components, but they do not have any material components. Instead, they have immaterial components which are immaterial or abstract objects, such as numbers, propositions, sets, software, websites, or bits of data. By countenancing such immaterial-normative compounds, we are able to account for social objects such as bitcoins, constitutions, speed limits, and online stores. Thus, for instance, we may take bitcoins to be immaterial-normative compounds whose immaterial components are bits of data. And we may take constitutions, speed limits, and online stores to be immaterial-normative compounds whose immaterial components are propositions, numbers, and websites, respectively.

Like material-normative compounds, immaterial-normative compounds are governed by principles of existence, parthood, and location. The following principle tells us when an immaterial-normative compound *x* of kind *K* exists:

to the playing of such social and cultural roles, it follows that the normative properties of natural objects are oftentimes relevant to our practical interests.

41. Smith (2003: 285–91) and Thomasson (2003: 273) raise a similar challenge for Searle's theory of institutional reality.

Existence′: An immaterial-normative compound x of kind K, associated with normative components $R_1,\ldots,R_n$ and a range of suitable immaterial components, exists at a time t if and only if (i) there exist some suitable immaterial components $m_1,\ldots,m_k$ which are the immaterial components of x at t; and (ii) $m_1,\ldots,m_k$ stand in relations $R_1,\ldots,R_n$ at t.[42]

And at any time t at which an immaterial-normative compound x of kind K exists, it satisfies the following principle of parthood:

Parthood′: (i) Each immaterial component of x at t is a part of x at t; and (ii) each of the normative components associated with kind K is a part of x.

Finally, given that immaterial or abstract objects are not spatially located, it is plausible to suppose that immaterial-normative compounds are not spatially located. Thus, at any time t at which an immaterial-normative compound x of kind K exists, it satisfies the following location principle:

Location′: x is not spatially located at t.

It may be thought that this proposed extension of the normative hylomorphic theory is in tension with the central commitment of hylomorphism, which is that objects are in some sense compounds of matter and form. For given the ordinary dictionary definition of 'matter' as

42. It is presumed here that immaterial-normative compounds exist in time, which might seem odd given that they are entirely immaterial or abstract. But immaterial-normative compounds are no different in this regard than artifacts such as musical works, novels, and fictional characters, which are widely held to be abstract objects that exist in time. See, e.g., Levinson (1980), Thomasson (1999), and Evnine (2016: §4.4). Furthermore, the fact that immaterial-normative compounds exist in time is explicable: their existence is a matter of some immaterial components instantiating some normative components, and this instantiation occurs in time even if the components themselves do not exist in time. Compare this with the following: the number 13 currently instantiates the property *being AP's favorite number*, and this instantiation occurs in time even though both the number and the property are arguably abstract objects that do not exist in time.

'physical substance in the universe', immaterial or abstract matter is a contradiction in terms. But the hylomorphist need not construe matter as physical substance in the universe.[43] Instead, she can construe an object's matter as the substance(s) from which that object is made. Given this alternative conception of matter, the idea of immaterial or abstract matter is not inherently contradictory.

7. Comparison with other accounts

I will conclude by briefly comparing my normative hylomorphic theory of social objects with two prominent views in the social ontology literature: John Searle's (1995) theory of institutional facts and Katherine Ritchie's (2013, 2020) account of organized social groups. This comparison will help to further clarify and highlight what is distinctive about my account.

Searle's theory focuses on institutional social facts, which are facts that cannot obtain without human institutions. According to Searle, we create such facts by assigning statuses with associated functions ('status functions') to physical entities in the world (1995: 39–41). And we do this through our collective acceptance of 'constitutive rules' of the form 'X counts as Y in C', where 'X' picks out a particular object or a class of objects which meet certain specified conditions, 'Y' names a status function, and 'C' names a context (1995: 43–46). Moreover, on Searle's view, status functions typically carry 'deontic powers' such as rights, duties, obligations, or permissions. And so assignments of status functions typically involve an assignment of deontic powers to some individuals (1995: 100–101).

My normative hylomorphic theory converges with Searle's theory on the idea that social reality has both a physical and a normative

43. Many hylomorphists evidently do not construe matter in this way, as they countenance hylomorphic compounds with immaterial or abstract matter. See, e.g., Aristotle (*Metaphysics* Z.10 1036a9–12) on the 'intelligible matter' of mathematical objects, Fine (1999: 72) on variable embodiments with immaterial manifestations, Johnston (2006: 654–55) on abstract unities, and Evnine (2016: §4.4) on abstract artifacts including musical works, fictional characters, and languages.

aspect to it. However, my theory concerns social *objects*, whereas Searle's theory primarily concerns social *facts*. Social objects are things such as borders, dollar bills, and committees. Social facts are entities such as the fact that the river is (or constitutes) a border, the fact that the piece of paper is (or constitutes) a dollar bill, and the fact that the committee is composed of people. Social objects persist through time and can undergo change over time, whereas social facts do not persist or change in this way; social objects exist, whereas social facts obtain; and many social objects occupy a determinate region of space, whereas social facts do not occupy space in this way. These differences demonstrate that social objects and social facts are distinct sorts of social entities. Thus, my theory and Searle's theory are focused on explaining different phenomena.[44]

The target of Ritchie's account is organized social groups such as clubs, committees, and teams. Such entities are social objects in the relevant sense, and so this target is closer to my own.[45] According to Ritchie, an organized social group is a realization of a structure (2013: §6). Whenever an organized social group exists, it has some members and a structure that is realized by its members. The structure is a complex or network of relations that together capture the functional organization of the group (2020: 405, 411). Ritchie originally proposed that this structure consists of functional relations (2013: 268), but more recently she has suggested that in at least some cases it might include normative relations (2020: 411).

My normative hylomorphic account agrees with Ritchie's structuralist account that organized social groups such as clubs, committees,

and teams are to be understood in terms of both their members and certain relations that hold between the members. However, our accounts differ over the nature of the relevant relations. In my view, these are always normative relations involving conventional morality or political morality, the law, or social norms or rules. For Ritchie, on the other hand, these may be functional relations. Thus, for example, whereas my account says that the relevant relations in the case of the graduate admissions committee are normative relations such as *together having the power to admit graduate students*, Ritchie's account implies that the relevant relations may be functional relations such as *together admitting graduate students*. Normativity is thus more integral to the identity of organized social groups on my account than on Ritchie's account.

A final point worth emphasizing is that my normative hylomorphic theory aims to account for the whole vast array of social objects, which includes organized social groups but much else besides — for instance, borders, states, dollars, bitcoins, corporations, organizations, universities, and constitutions. In so doing, it seeks to advance our understanding of the social world by elucidating certain very general features of its ontology.[46]

44. Searle does make some suggestive remarks about social objects, which I discussed earlier. Some of these remarks indicate that Searle holds an identity view of seemingly concrete social objects (see §3.1), whereas others suggest that he holds an eliminativist view (see §3.3). For an argument that Searle is best construed as an identity theorist, see Hansson Wahlberg (2014: §2).

45. Ritchie also develops an account of what she calls 'feature social groups', which include racial groups, gender groups, and economic classes (2020: §5). I take it that feature social groups are not social objects in my sense, and so this part of Ritchie's account has a different target than my own account. For this reason, I focus here on Ritchie's account of organized social groups.

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