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Defining and Defending Realism in Social Ontology

Consider the following perspectives on the ontological status of social facts. *First*, in everyday experience, social facts are real. Tax rates, parking fines, property laws, inflation, jazz concerts, Nobel prizes, gendered and racial oppression - to different degrees, all of these have significance and normative consequences in social practices. *Second*, regarding such facts and phenomena, the most widespread view in contemporary social ontology is constructionism. This is the view that we should understand social facts as constituted by, or as resulting from, the beliefs and actions of agents as well as interactions between them. Constructionists disagree among themselves about whether their view is best cast as realist or as anti-realist. And *third*, according to mainstream analytic metaphysics, the mark of realism is mind-independence. As beliefs, actions, interactions, and social practices generally all involve and depend on minds, social facts do not count as real from this perspective.

These perspectives are incompatible with each other. For instance, everyday realism and realist constructionism are compatible, but contradict the mainstream definition of metaphysical realism; this definition coheres with anti-realist constructionism, but each of these two perspectives contradicts everyday realism. What are we to make of this? Is realism a tenable view in social ontology? If so, how does it relate to metaphysical realism as commonly conceived?

In this talk, I build on work by Sally Haslanger and others to provide a framework for defining realism in social ontology, and I lay out which understanding of realism should be adopted. This understanding, I argue, aligns with everyday realism, reframes key constructionist claims, and suggests amending the mainstream definition of metaphysical realism.