Is Social Ontology Prior to Social Scientific Methodology?

Richard Lauer (rlauer@stlawu.edu), St. Lawrence University

Abstract

In this article I examine “Ontology Matters!” (OM!) arguments. OM! arguments conclude that ontology can contribute to empirical success in social science. First, I capture the common form between different OM! arguments. Second, I describe quantifier variance as discussed in metaontology. Third, I apply quantifier variance to the common form of OM! arguments. I then present two ways in which ontology is prior to social science methodology, one realist and one pragmatic. I argue that a pragmatic interpretation of ontology’s priority gives proponents of realist OM! arguments a special burden that they must meet to render their argument successful.

# 1. Introduction

The discipline of social ontology studies the nature and properties of the social world. It seeks to answer distinctly ontological questions about the nature of groups, institutions, and anything else that can be classified as “social”. Much like traditional analytic ontology, where the goal is to determine what populates the world, *social* ontology is concerned with what populates the social world and deploys characteristically philosophical (armchair) methods to arrive at a correct picture. Some philosophers are optimistic that social ontology so conceived can promote empirical success in the social sciences[[1]](#footnote-1), where it has long been observed that certain kinds of scientific achievements have remained out of reach, e.g. novel and precise prediction (Elster 2009, Epstein 2015, Rosenberg 1992). In particular, Epstein (2015) and Searle (2009) argue that social ontology can promote success both in prediction and in explanation by providing a correct picture of the social world. In this article, I present what I take to be the common form between different arguments for this position, which I call “Ontology Matters!” (OM!) arguments and assess these arguments by drawing on the phenomenon of quantifier variance discussed in metaontology. I argue that when applied to the basic reasoning in OM! arguments, quantifier variance (the view that the existential quantifier has multiple meanings) reveals two ways in which ontology may be prior to social science methodology, one realist and one pragmatic. Further, I argue that a pragmatic interpretation of ontology’s priority gives proponents of realist OM! arguments a special burden that they must satisfy to render their argument successful.

The argument I identify as the core argument shared between instances of OM! says that ontology contributes to the success of science (success in explanation and prediction) because answering ontological questions can contribute to empirical success. Searle and Epstein have both made the case for a priori ontological reasoning, drawing broadly on tools from analytic philosophy to achieve their aims. If their arguments are successful, this suggests that successful ontological theorizing, that which cuts the (social) world at the joints, plays a crucial role the progress of science. I refer to these arguments as ‘realist OM! arguments.’

I present a pragmatic alternative to realist OM! arguments. Instead of relying on the idea that scientifically useful social ontology cuts the social world at its joints, the pragmatic alternative states that the desirability of a social ontology depends on its empirical merits. These merits are understood in terms of the role of a statement in enabling inferences to phenomena for prediction and/or explanation. The appeal to inferential roles does not require a commitment to any entities posited. The choice between pragmatic and realist views presents a significant burden of proof that proponents of realist OM! arguments must meet to render their arguments successful, i.e. that successfully cutting the social world at its joints is important for making theoretical progress in social science.

My discussion proceeds as follows. In section 2, I will reconstruct the basic reasoning for OM! arguments. In section 3, I will introduce the phenomenon of quantifier variance and use it to formulate the pragmatic interpretation of the core OM! argument. I also present the case of ontological discussions in evolutionary economics to further motivate the pragmatic alternative. I conclude with reflection on broader issues, in particular the relationship of this debate to the debate between scientific realists and anti-realists and the conception of social ontology underlying the pragmatic alternative.

# 2. Ontology Matters!

Ontology Matters arguments support the claim that social ontology matters to the achievement of prediction and explanation in social science. According to those advancing these arguments, social ontology matters because a better ontology can aid in the generation of predictive and explanatory improvements for the social sciences. If we have a better philosophicalor pre-scientific understanding of the social world, joined with our best scientific methods, then we should expect explanatory and predictive success in the social sciences. This allows concepts derived in social ontology a place in our scientific toolkit, i.e. allows is to be a part of the process of theory construction. Conversely, the absence of explanatory and/or predictive success in the social sciences signals a deficiency in our philosophical or pre-scientific understanding of the social world.

Consider some examples. Searle (2008) argues

“I believe that where the social sciences are concerned, social ontology is prior to methodology and theory. It is prior in the sense that unless you have a clear conception of the nature of the phenomena you are investigating, you are unlikely to develop the right methodology and the right theoretical apparatus for conducting the investigation.” (443)

Searle’s “unless” suggests that in the absence of a clear conception of the social world, we should not expect successful social science. Similarly, Little (2016) argues,

“… I believe that the social sciences need to be framed out of consideration for a better understanding of the nature of the social – a better social ontology – if we are to be more successful in understanding and explaining the processes of social change the twenty-first century presents.” (1)

Epstein (2015) produces similar arguments,

“Ontology has ramifications, and ontological mistakes lead to scientific mistakes. Commitments about the nature of the entities in a science – how they are composed, the entities on which they ontologically depend – are woven into the models of the science” (127)

By Epstein’s premises, the mistaken ontology of a model or theory can lead to scientific mistakes, particular those concerning prediction and explanation. An ontology that is ‘mistaken’ is an ontology that fails to cut at the world’s joints. Consider, for example, Epstein’s use of Virchow’s cell theory (44). Virchow treated organisms as entirely comprised of cells. This led to mistaken explanations of some phenomena, i.e. tooth decay.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Finally, consider Lohse (2017),

“There is a well-established alternative understanding of what ontological investigations can be, namely, the investigation of explicit and implicit assumptions of theories and explanatory frameworks, that is, the investigation of the *ontological demands on the world presupposed* by scientific theories, models, and related explanatory practices.” (13)

Lohse’s position is more modest than the others – it does not give primacy to ontological theorizing, but gives ontology a complementary role where ontology can help by measuring the contents of a theory or model against the world, which may yield empirically fruitful results.[[3]](#footnote-3) On Lohse’s view, ontological thinking about social science treats the social sciences as a subject of inquiry for ontological investigations, meaning that we will focus heavily on categories as social scientists conceive them, not necessarily as ontologists conceive them. However, and crucially, on Lohse’s account we should “extend beyond” (14) theories – ontological inquiries should address the issue of whether certain entities have certain properties.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Taken together, these arguments visit common themes. Each suggests that we ought to investigate what *there is* for the purposes of improving social scientific models and theories. Moreover, each suggests that this can be done by way of *ontological theorizing.* For Epstein and Searle, this is a matter of deriving a priori frameworks that entail ontological conclusions, which, if correct, aid in generating correct explanations (and, in Epstein’s case, accurate predictions) of social phenomena. In Lohse’s case, this is a matter of exploring those ontological commitments implicit in social scientific theories – this means answering questions about what theories require of the world and whether these requirements are met. In sum: OM! arguments suggest that the success of science depends on ontology to the extent that correctly identifying properties of the world will aid in producing successful social science.

The core reasoning behind OM! arguments may be summarized as follows:

Ontology contributes to the success of science (success in explanation and prediction) because answering ontological questions can contribute to empirical success, i.e. successful predictions and/or explanations.

The crucial concept in this formulation is that of an *answer* to an ontological question. The idea of the empirical significance of answering ontological questions is central to each of the accounts described above. The relevant sense in which ontological questions are answered requires that we grasp what certain entities are like independently of scientific theorizing, i.e. we should go beyond what our scientific theories say about certain entities in order to derive better theories and models.

This argument also relies on a particular way of understanding ontology. ‘Ontology’ as I understand it is concerned with answering ontological questions – that is, as a practice, ontologists have the aim of answering questions about what there is. This is the thrust of the argument: social ontology has as its goal *carving the social world at its joints* and its proponents suggest that thispromotes empirical success. In section 3, I will unpack this formulation of OM! arguments and provide realist and pragmatic construals of the argument.

For now, we should request prima facie motivations for OM!’s premise – are there any clear instances where ontological theorizing is empirically fruitful for social scientists, i.e. do we have any reason to believe that the premise is true? Let’s return to Epstein (2015) and Lohse (2017).

First let’s consider Epstein. Epstein presents a thought experiment intended to challenge ontological individualism, the thesis that facts about the social world are entirely determined by (grounded in) facts about individual people. Epstein asks us to consider a possible social phenomenon: Starbucks goes insolvent. Why? Because overnight, while all of its employees were asleep, the machines in its stores broke down rendering the employees unable to sell drinks. This causes Starbucks’ liabilities to exceed its assets and it therefore becomes insolvent. Ontological individualism suggests that only facts about the individual workers should explain Starbucks’ insolvency, but here it seems that Starbucks’ resources do most of the explanatory and/or predictive work. Thus, ontological individualism blocks successful explanation/prediction because it demands that we treat the individual Starbucks employees as the only factors determining Starbucks’ insolvency. But we can address this failure by rejecting ontological individualism. Therefore, answering ontological questions about the social world promotes successful social science.

Now let’s consider Lohse’s discussion. Lohse’s clearest example of the relevance of ontology to social science is the case of organizational ecology where there is a debate over the existence of Darwinian mechanisms of selection acting on populations of organizations (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Reydon and Scholz 2014). Critiques of this research program seem to be ontological in nature: populations of organizations simply are not the kinds of things that can evolve because they lack those features that make biological populations subject to evolution (genetic relationships and so heritable traits). They are not what we might call, like Godfrey-Smith (2009), *Darwinian Populations*, i.e. populations capable of undergoing evolution by natural selection. On Lohse’s account, this discourse counts as ontological in a broad sense – we are concerned with the ontological constraints on evolving populations and whether certain populations are subject to those same constraints. The empirical fruitfulness of this type of theorizing consists in its ability to yield determinate conclusions about whether systems are amenable to certain styles of explanation (evolutionary explanation, in this case). Answering the ontological question concerning whether firms are the subjects of evolutionary change introduces a distinctive way of understanding their behavior and so can encourage the generation of new hypotheses. Therefore, answering ontological questions can, again, yield empirical benefits.

The foregoing examples present plausible motivations for the claim that ontological theorizing is empirically fruitful. By giving a priori challenges to theses about the nature of the social world, particularly those that social scientists may endorse, we can broaden or restrict the space of possible social scientific hypotheses. It is by inspiring the creation of new hypotheses that serve in predictions and explanations that ontology contributes to the success of science.

How valuable is the role afforded to social ontology? Given the role of the social sciences, particularly economics, in directing and formulating policy, it is significant. Consider an analogy to Van Fraassen (2002, 15)’s argument against analytic ontology[[5]](#footnote-5): he argues that there are considerable differences in the payoffs we can expect when choosing between scientific theories and ontological theories. In medicine, the truth of scientists’ beliefs about the effectiveness of a medicine comes with significant moral stakes. If scientists have false beliefs about the effectiveness of a medicine, many people may be harmed and if they believe truly, many people may benefit. In ontology, Van Fraassen argues, the stakes seem to concern *only* the truth and falsehood of our beliefs.

One might entertain similar hypotheses about social ontology: can it really contribute to the social sciences? Epstein suggests that *analytic metaphysics* has importance here. His framework builds on the *grounding* relation. Searle’s ontological inferences are borne out of a particular conception of rules and the properties of speech acts. Someone inclined towards empiricism (as I am) might deny the relevance of any of these projects and note the distance these notions seem to have from scientific practice. When Lohse suggests that we should determine whether entities have the properties specified by our theories, it is reasonable for an empiricist to ask why this should not just involve the process of testing and revising hypotheses in light of the evidence in order to arrive at empirical adequacy, to the exclusion of an independent activity we call “ontology” (whether analytic ontology or some other approach). OM! arguments, one might insist, push against the empiricist intuition by showing that successful ontology, i.e. the production of answers to ontological questions that cut the world at its joints, is an essential part of the process of revising and testing hypotheses. Thus, if OM! arguments are sound, ontology has a central place in the practice of science.

So, much depends on the soundness of OM! arguments. If they are sound, then we can avail ourselves of further conceptual resources for the improvement of the social sciences and perhaps even grant social ontology policy relevance. In the next section, I give a critical assessment of OM! arguments. I conclude that where OM! arguments are successful, they do not require a conception of ontology (and hence social ontology) where the answers to ontological questions “cut” at the world’s joints. Instead, I present an OM! argument that makes the empirical merits of an ontology depend on its ability to enable inferences to predicted phenomena and new explananda.

# Assessing OM!

In this section, I unpack the core OM! argument and formulate different versions of it. To do this, I appeal to the phenomenon of quantifier variance. There is a dispute in metaontology about whether the existential quantifier of first-order predicate logic is *univocal* (admits of one meaning) or *equivocal* (admits of multiple meanings) as well as whether it is ontologically loaded, i.e. whether a statement deploying it entails ontological commitment. A number of prominent philosophers endorse the view that there are multiple meanings of the existential quantifier (Carnap 1950; Hofweber 2009, 2012; McDaniel 2009), and others still suggest that the use of an existential quantifier does not necessarily entail that one is committed to the entities quantified over (Priest 2008).

In subsection 3.1 I will summarize briefly the conceptual terrain in the discussion about quantifier variance and focus on Hofweber (2009, 2016)’s view[[6]](#footnote-6). Hofweber argues both that the existential quantifier admits of multiple meanings and that at least one of those meanings does not carry ontological commitment. In 3.2, I will present detailed reformulations of OM! inspired by Hofweber’s distinction. In 3.3, I consider these insights in the context of the theory of the firm and evolutionary approaches to economic theorizing.

## *3.1 The Many Meanings of ‘∃’*

When we deploy existential quantifiers in ordinary language, it often seems that we deploy them in multiple senses. Consider, for example, “Some characters in the bible existed, others did not.” (Crane 2013) This sentence seems to involve a mix of ontological commitment and non-commitment. Sentences like these indicate why it is that treating existential quantifiers as equivocal seems like an attractive view. We can more easily make sense of what someone intends to communicate when they deploy such sentences if existential quantifiers are equivocal. For example, one way to assess such sentences is to interpret existential quantifiers as neutral about whether there are such things and allow that ‘some’ does not imply that anything (strictly) ‘exists’ – then, when we ask what we mean by “real” we posit a different notion, one of “ontological commitment” where we deploy the existential quantifier in a way that implies that one believes that some biblical characters existed.

The possibility of multiple meanings of existential quantifiers, or ‘∃’, opens the conceptual terrain to at least two positions:

**Univocalism**: ‘∃’ has one meaning.

**Equivocalism**: ‘∃’ has multiple meanings.

Debates over the correctness of these views go back to the debate between Quine and Carnap about the nature of ontological commitment. Famously, Quine (1953)’s view was that to be was to be the value of a bound variable – there is no variation in meaning for ‘∃’, either something serves as the value of the variable attached to the existential quantifier or it does not. Here it is natural to consider the concept of a logical domain. To say that something is an F is just to say that there is something in a specified logical domain that is an F. This is unlike Carnap (1950), who famously distinguished external and internal existence questions. The former concern those things that exist apart from the language we use. The latter concern those things whose existence is implied by a linguistic framework. For each of these questions, one can posit a distinct existential quantifier. Thus, Quine exemplifies the univocalist position while Carnap exemplifies the equivocalist position.

There are further nuances we can add to these distinctions. Carnap’s internal/external distinction allows for existential quantification to concern those entities internal to a linguistic framework as well as those entities external to it. But one might assume an equivocalist position by positing *different modes of being.* That is, one can take a Meinongian view and judge that there is a difference between ‘there is’ and ‘exists’ – some things might *be* but fail to exist.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, the sentence about biblical characters involves different types or grades of ontological commitment. In particular, these commitments would be to those characters that *existed* (those that had some physical and/or actual manifestation in the world) and those that simply *are* (those that that need not have any particular physical and/or actual manifestation but that subsist). This differs from Carnap’s approach, where statements like this one could be relativized to the particular linguistic framework. To say that a biblical character existed or did not is to make implicit claims about the entailments of the statements in our linguistic framework.

The position from which I draw my inspiration for this article comes from Hofweber (2009;2016). Hofweber is an equivocalist and distinguishes between the “domain conditions” reading and the “inferential role” reading of the existential quantifier. This distinction takes its inspiration from Carnap’s own internal/external distinction. We may define them as follows:

**Domain Conditions ‘∃dc’**: The statement “Something is an F” picks out something that falls under the domain of the quantifier. For example, statements like “there are numbers” pick out abstract entities.

**Inferential Role ‘∃ir’**:The statement “Something is an F” serves the role of enabling inferences in our language. For example, when asked whether there are numbers, one might answer with sentences accepted in our language: “One is a number, two is a number. Therefore, there are numbers” (24)

Because of its centrality to my treatment of OM! I want to stress the function of the inferential role ‘∃’ – this quantifier is not intended to pick out things in the world but instead intended to enable inferences between sentences in one’s language (Hofweber 2016, 25). For the purposes of my discussion, the inferential roles of interest to me are the inferential roles statements can play in allowing us to infer explananda or predicted phenomena.[[8]](#footnote-8) This will be central to the discussion of the following subsection.

I want to present one more item for consideration before moving to my treatment of OM!. I assume a broadly Hofweberian approach to interpreting existence claims rather than a Meinongian approach. One might wonder why. The answer is that my choice is strategic. In assessing whether social ontology can make contributions to the success of social science, my concern is whether we need to be able to come to true or correct beliefs about what exists *in the external sense* of the question, i.e. related to the domain conditions reading of ‘∃’. The Meinongian provides two quantifiers that we can understand as *external* but my task is to ask whether we need external quantifiers *at all*. Thus, the Hofweber-Carnap distinction between internal and external quantifiers is suitable to the purposes of this article.

## *3.2 Challenging OM!’s Soundness*

With that said, let’s turn to consider OM! again. I presented OM! as follows:

P1. Answering ontological questions can contribute to empirical success.

∴Ontology can contribute to the success of science (success in explanation and prediction)

To present the argument more persuasively we can make explicit additional assumptions. The argument should be filled out in a way that makes clear where existential quantification enters the argument.

With this in mind, consider the following unpacked version OM!:

P1. Ontology aims at answering ontological questions.

P2. An answer to an ontological question is a statement of the form “Something is an F”

P3. Statements of the form “Something is an F” can contribute to the empirical success.

∴Ontology can contribute to the success of science.

The first premise expresses the point I made earlier: that ‘ontology’ as it is deployed for this argument relates to the intellectual discipline and its aims. Analytic ontologists have particular epistemic aims characterized as the answering of ontological questions, i.e. using certain analytic tools to uncover what there is.[[9]](#footnote-9) The second premise of the argument presents a place where we can introduce the relevance of existential quantification to the argument. I follow Hofweber here. We may say that an ontological question has the form “Are there Fs?” and its answer has the form “Something is an F.” which deploys an existential quantifier. Finally, the third premise states that statements of that form can promote empirical success (which I take to denote forms of scientific success). This premise establishes the tie between ontological results and scientific results. Were we to defend this premise, we would require cases in which the introduction of such statement has promoted scientific aims.

The crucial point, as I suggested earlier, is what constitutes *an answer* to an ontological question – we can interpret “Something is an F” statements in terms of inferential role and domain conditions quantifiers. The implications of this are important to the core argument’s soundness.

Suppose that the ontological questions are understood in terms of ‘∃ir’. Then we arrive at a *pragmatic* OM! argument:

P1) Ontology aims at answering ontological questions.

P2) An answer to an ontological question is a statement of the form “∃ir(x)Fx”

P3) Statements of the form “∃ir(x)Fx” can contribute empirical success

∴Ontology can contribute to the success of science.

If it is understood in terms of ‘∃dc’ then we arrive at a *realist* OM! argument:

P1) Ontology aims at answering ontological questions.

P2\*) An answer to an ontological question is a statement of the form “∃dc(x) Fx”

P3\*) Statements of the form “∃dc(x)Fx” can contribute to empirical success.

∴Ontology can contribute to the success of science.

In the first argument above, “∃ir” is the inferential role quantifier. In the other ‘∃dc’ is the domain conditions quantifier. The latter argument better reflects the views of Searle, Epstein, and Lohse presented earlier.

These interpretations present new questions about arguments like Epstein’s. Is Epstein’s argument successful *because* it proposes an ontology that succeeds in cutting the social world at its joints? Is it successful because of the effectiveness of *engaging in ontological thinking* in social scientific contexts (even without positing an independent domain of entities)? The pragmatic and realist OM! arguments correspond to different positions one might hold about the priority of ontology to social science methodology.

*Pragmatic View:* Social ontology can aid in empirical success by introducing statements into our social scientific theories/models that make them empirically adequate. These statements do not entail a commitment to what there is.

*Realist View*: Social ontology can aid in empirical success through the successful answering of ontological questions. Social scientific theories and models become empirically adequate by determining what there is.

I will not defend one of these conceptions. Instead, I present the pragmatic view as an alternative to realism. Proponents of OM! arguments desire a connection between the discipline of ontology and social scientific success. However, should we understand that contribution in terms of the *Pragmatic* or *Realist views*? Consider each of these positions applied to Epstein’s Starbucks example.

1. *Realist View*: Something, a collection of non-individuals, is the cause of Starbucks’ insolvency.
2. *Pragmatic View*: The statement “such and such non-individuals are causes of Starbucks’ insolvency” enables the inference to the prediction and/or explanandum describing Starbucks’ insolvency (but does not entail that there are non-individuals).

Each of these suggest different ways social ontology may contribute to the success of social science. On the domain conditions reading, social ontology makes its contribution in a fairly traditional way, by yielding an ontology that has the right relationship to things in the world. On the inferential role reading, ontological investigations in the social sciences may yield benefits by providing us with statements that enable inferences to predictions or explanations, where before we might have lacked the ability to perform such inferences. That is, for the pragmatic view the role of social ontology is instrumental, and so whether we should adopt a statement or set of statements *for scientific purposes* depends on the inferences made possible.

If we assume that existential quantifiers in the context of social ontology and social science are inferential role quantifiers, we do not need to move beyond thinking about social ontology’s contribution in terms of possible improvements to empirical adequacy. It is plausible that the contribution of social ontology is well accounted for in terms of what an inferential role quantifier should do: enable inferences. For example, introducing statements that express commitment to non-individualistic entities as causes of social phenomena enables the prediction and/or explanation of Starbucks’ insolvency, thus facilitating the inferential connections we desire between background theory and our often recalcitrant observations. This inferential function does not necessitate existential commitment to those entities any more than valid inferences from a statement require the truth of that statement. The function of these statements is pragmatic. Such statements may open new possibilities that can further scientific aims, all without requiring a realist attitude.

## *3.3 Ontological Choices in Economics*

I will now present the case of evolutionary economics as an instance in which it seems social scientists may make pragmatic decisions about ontology but where it is unclear that existential commitment is necessary. That is: in these cases we can well account for the kinds of choices economists may make as the result of pragmatic considerations and not necessarily as the result of choosing ontologies that relate appropriately to the world.

Let’s first begin by considering candidate ontological question inspired by Lohse’s discussion: “are there populations of organizations that are Darwinian populations?” As before, we can consider two answers to this question, each of which deploys either the inferential role or domain conditions readings of the existential quantifier. Straightforwardly, the answer is that there is (or is not) such a population.

Statements using the domain conditions reading of ‘∃’ say that something exists independently of the linguistic system that we use to talk about it that we can rightfully (or not) call both a population of organizations and a Darwinian population – it is a real thing that really undergoes process of natural selection, though it is a distinctly social collection of entities. On the inferential role reading, no such thing needs to exist. Instead, what matters is the role the thing quantified over plays in enabling inferences to predicted phenomena or explananda of interest to social scientists. Instead of concerning ourselves with whether there really are such populations, we may ask about the empirical merits of moving to a view of organizations that treats them as amenable to evolutionary styles of explanation.

That evolutionary economists are concerned with the pragmatic benefits of moving to an evolutionary approach fits well with the rationale for pursuing the project of the evolutionary explanation of economic systems in general. Consider, for example, Metcalfe (2008) on the explanatory aims of evolutionary economics:

“What are the phenomena that an evolutionary approach to economics seeks to account for? In the broadest sense they include the development of the structure of the economy, the changing patterns of what is produced, including the appearance of new goods and services and the demise of existing ones, the changing allocation of resources, and the changing patterns of expenditure by firms and household consumers …” (26)

An ‘evolutionary’ account would provide us with a way of generating explanations of *economic change.* Why is this significant? Because the relevant alternatives to the evolutionary approach are not as effective at explaining change. This, at least according to the discussants in this area, seems to suggest that we should move to an alternative ontological framework.

For example, Edith Penrose (1959) juxtaposes the interest in economic change with the observation that the static models of the firm in mainstream economic theory do little to supply us with the resources for explaining such change. With respect to the neoclassical firm:

[i]t makes little difference … whether changes in the characteristics of the individual firm … are treated as causing changes in the size of a single firm or as causing the creation of a series of new firms.” (12)

Ultimately, we may understand the choice to move to an evolutionary framework for understanding social phenomena as pragmatic. When our interests concern explaining how a single firm changes and shifts its productive behavior over time, our theory should not lead us to indifference regarding the identity of that firm. While this leaves room for considering things like the identity conditions of firms, it does not necessarily entail that firms are such that they persist over time (when read using ∃ir).

Beyond concerns with the identity of firms, macroeconomic phenomena like growth may be better explained using evolutionary approaches. For example, Foster (2014), in motivating the use of an evolutionary approach notes Solow (1957)’s discovery using neoclassical economic theory and a Cobb-Douglas production function that 80% of economic growth in the 19th century remains unexplained. The correct move, Foster, notes, is to understand economic growth as a *historical* process, something we are unable to do with static equilibrium models of the economy. Instead, the historical approach is distinctly a non-equilibrium approach, in that economic systems are not understood as floating around fixed points but instead as continuously changing entities.

Evolutionary economists want a theory that explains *change* and make moves to avail themselves of the theoretical resources required to achieve this goal. They have, possibly, an explicit choice of ontology. They may choose the static equilibrium models that deploy representative agents who maximize utility against their budget constraints and firms that aim to maximize profits, or non-equilibrium models that, as Dopfer and Potts (2004) suggest, treat economies as complex dynamical systems, systems subject to constant change. The choice of ontology in these cases is a matter of what we need to explain and predict the phenomena of interest to social scientists. For the pragmatic view, this is a matter of how well the ontology enables the achievement of scientific aims.

Should we interpret the ontological commitments suggested here as cutting the social world at its joints? It does not seem that there is a need to. It is sufficient to think about the pragmatic reasons economists have for deploying their favored tools. Our ability to account coherently for social scientific activity in terms of the pragmatic view leaves it better motivated. Proponents of realist OM! arguments, to better account for this, should motivate the realist interpretation of these claims.

# Conclusion: What is Ontology’s Role?

The foregoing discussion suggests that proponents of realist OM! arguments, if they require that answers to ontological questions deploy ∃dc, have a special burden. This is the burden of arguing that a traditional conception of social ontology (an account of what there is in the social world) contributes to success in social science *because* this practice leads to ontologies that successfully cut at the social world’s joints. Otherwise, parsimony should push us to prefer the pragmatic view because it seems we can account for ontological choice without realism.

These positions should look familiar to someone acquainted with the debate between scientific realists and anti-realists. Consider this passage from Psillos (1999):

“[Duhem] wants to suggest that physics can be developed without first having to answer these two questions: Does there exist a material reality distinct from sensible appearances? And if there does, what is the nature of this reality?” (28)

The pragmatic position as I have described it here suggests the same for social science – in social science, we needn’t answer ontological questions (questions and answers using ‘∃dc’) to do successful social science. Yet, when we bring metaontological considerations to bear on OM! arguments, there is some suggestion that, in fact, we should *assume* that such questions are answered or must be answered. That is, there is a *presumption of realism* contained in the OM! arguments presented in the literature that requires justification.

This presumption is concerning because not only does it assume that existential claims appeal to things in the world, it assumes that the connection to the world is important for achieving scientific aims. Because of the presumption of realism, one might also insist that much of the debate about the priority of social ontology to social scientific methodology may be reduced to the debate about scientific realism and anti-realism in the social sciences. But if so, then this presents even more challenges for proponents of OM! arguments because, by the lights of the traditional criteria required for realism (novel predictive success), the social sciences face significant challenges.

However, I have suggested that the pragmatic view might characterize the priority differently in terms of the instrumental value of ontological assumptions for social scientific theorizing without a corresponding commitment to realism. Also, I have suggested that we might plausibly interpret ontological choice in the social sciences in pragmatic terms. While this allows us to escape concerns over scientific realism in the social sciences, it pushes us to think of social ontology, at least in terms of its relevance to the social sciences, as concerned with enabling inferences to phenomena for prediction and explanation.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is not a traditional conception of social ontology. So, social ontology may be prior to social scientific methodology, but perhaps not social ontology as traditionally construed.

Works Cited

Carnap, Rudolf. 1950. Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology.’ *Revue Interationale de Philosophie* 4*.*

Crane, Timothy. 2013. The Objects of Thought. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dennett, Daniel. 1987. The Intentional Stance. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Dopfer, Kurt and Jason Potts. 2004. Evolutionary Realism: A new Ontology for Economics. *Journal of Economic Methodology*. 11: 195-212.

Elster, Jon. 2009. Excessive Ambitions. *Capitalism and Society* 4: Article 1.

Epstein, Brian. 2015. The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fine, Arthur. 1984. The Natural Ontological Attitude. *In Scientific Realism* edited by Jarrett Leplin. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Foster, John. 2014. Energy, Knowledge, and Economic Growth. *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*. 24.

French, Steven and Kerry McKenzie. 2012. Thinking Outside the Toolbox: Towards a More Productive Engagement between Metaphysics and Philosophy of Physics. *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy*. 8: 42-59.

Godfrey-Smith, Peter. 2009. Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hannan, Michael T. and John Freeman. 1977. The Population Ecology of Organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*. 82: 929-964

Hofweber, Thomas. 2009. Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics. *In Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* edited by David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hofweber, Thomas. 2016. Carnap’s Big Idea. In *Ontology After Carnap* edited by Stephan Blattie and Sandra Lapointe. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ladyman, James and Don Ross. 2010. Everything Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized. New York: Oxford University Press.

Le Bihan, Baptiste and Adrien Barton. Forthcoming. Analytic Metaphysics versus Naturalized Metaphysics: The Relevance of Applied Technology. *Erkenntnis*.

List, Christian and Philip Pettit. Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents. New York: Oxford University Press.

Little, Daniel. 2016. New Directions in the Philosophy of Social Science. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Lohse, Simon. 2017. Pragmatism, Ontology and Philosophy of the Social Sciences in Practice**.** *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 47: 3-27.

McDaniel, Kris. 2009. Ways of Being. *In Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* edited by David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman. New York: Oxford University Press.

Metcalfe, John Stanley. 2008. Accounting for Economic Evolution: Fitness and the Population Method. *Journal of Bioeconomics*. 10: 23-49.

Penrose, Edith. 1959. The Theory of the Growth of the Firm. New York: Oxford University Press.

Priest. 2008. The Closing of the Mind: How the Particular Quantifier Became Existentially Loaded Behind our Backs. *The Review of Symbolic Logic*. 1: 42-55

Psillos, Stathis. 1999. *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth.* New York: Routledge.

Quine, W. V.O. 1953. On What There Is. In *From a Logical Point of View* by W.V.O. Quine. New York: Harper.

Reydon, Thomas and Markus Scholz. 2015. Searching for Darwinism in Generalized Darwinism. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*. 66: 561-589

Rosenberg, Alexander. 1992. *Economics: Mathematical Politics or Science of Diminishing Returns?* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Searle, John. 2008 Language and Social Ontology. *Theory and Society* 37: 443-459.

Solow, Robert. 1957. Technical Change and the Aggregate Production Function. *Review of Economic Statistics*. 39: 312-320.

Tahko, Touomas. 2015. An Introduction to Metametaphysics. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wimsatt, William. 2007. Re-Engineering Philosophy for Limited Beings: Piecewise Approximations to Reality. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Van Fraassen, Bas. 1980. The Scientific Image. New York: Oxford University Press.

Van Fraassen, Bas. 2002. The Empirical Stance. New Haven: Yale University Press.

1. In the philosophy of science there is skepticism about the prospects for traditional armchair methods of inquiry used in analytic philosophy, i.e. analytic metaphysics or ontology. For example, Ladyman and Ross (2010) argue that analytic metaphysics is largely a defunct project and should be replaced by a naturalistic metaphysics that aims to construct an ontology continuous with the results of scientific research. However, there are optimists who believe that analytic metaphysics in different forms might play a useful role in encouraging scientific progress in physics (French and McKenzie, 2012; Le Bihan and Barton, Forthcoming). I see this debate as running parallel to the discussion in the philosophy of social science concerning OM! arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This discussion is puzzling – as one reviewer noted, it is not sufficient for failures in prediction that an ontology is mistaken. Numerous models and theories deploy idealizations, in particular often cited examples of simple physical models that assume the absence of air resistance on falling bodies. Perhaps, however, mistaken ontologies are sufficient for predictive failure only in *certain* disciplines, though this seems like an ad hoc strategy for preserving the thesis. Moreover, this is why my general version of OM! deploys the word ‘can’ – to allow for heuristic/instrumental interpretations of these arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are other modest views. List and Pettit (2011) argue for something like OM! in their introductory discussion of group agency – they use Dennett (1987)’s *intentional stance*. Their position is that a stance towards a social system that treats it as a particular kind of thing can promote the generation of new hypotheses which may help to produce explanations or interventions to which we might otherwise be blind. Views like this are consistent with the pragmatic position I present later. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I find Lohse’s position puzzling. He deploys “inquiry” quite broadly and so does not necessarily have in mind analytic philosophy. By the same token, his view seems to be incompatible with the pragmatic view I present in this paper. So, ontological thinking is not necessarily grounded in the tools of analytic philosophy, nor is it focused exclusively on the process of scientific reasoning as providing the basis for answering ontological questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Van Fraassen (2002) presents his argument as an argument against analytic metaphysics – but, as a paradigm instance of metaphysics, he uses an ontological question: “does the world exist?” and treats metaphysics as directed at the answering of such questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I follow Tahko (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There are also Heideggerian views like McDaniel (2009)’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that Hofweber’s interests differ from mine. He is concerned with creating a space for ontology to make genuine intellectual contributions. The distinction between domain conditions quantifiers and inferential role quantifiers allows for the acceptance of basic claims about numbers that enable mathematicians to move forward without concern for the philosopher’s ontological questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Because my primary targets are Epstein and Searle, the reader should construe all references to the discipline of ontology and its epistemic aims in terms of the epistemic aims of analytic ontology. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alternatively, one might adopt the view that traditional social ontology may only be incidentally useful (sometimes, perhaps heuristically) to social science, but then it is unclear why one needs principled arguments for its priority and/or contributions to social science rather than case driven arguments that operationalize ontological frameworks for use in research contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)