Festschrift

This book is in honour of Professor Anna-Sofia Maurin on her 50th birthday. It consists of eighteen essays on metaphysical issues written by Swedish and international scholars.
Maurinian Truths

– Essays in Honour of
Anna-Sofia Maurin on her 50th Birthday

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg | Robin Stenwall (Eds.)
Towards a Nominalist Understanding of Institutions

Johan Brännmark

A very common understanding of institutions is that they are rules of some kind. For instance, an institutional economist like North (1990: 3) suggests that ‘[i]nstitutions are the rules of the game in a society’ and a social ontologist such as Gilbert (2018: 30) characterizes an institution as ‘a system of rules that is a blueprint for human behavior.’ In political theory, Rawls (1999: 47-48) takes the stance that an institution is ‘a public system of rules which defines offices and positions with their right and duties, powers and immunities, and the like.’ What this means is that if I hold a particular status, such as the right to perform a specific action, the fact that I, as a concrete and particular individual, hold this status is explained in terms of a certain rule being established in my community or society. Typically, that rule being established is then explained by it being collectively accepted in some relevant way (and where explicating the more exact relevant way is a main focus for many social ontologists). Ultimately, such collectives do of course consist in a number of concrete and particular individuals, but one notable feature of the standard account is that in order to explain particular institutional facts, an abstract entity is being postulated: a rule. This standard
model stands in contrast, however, to another possible type of account which instead understands institutions in terms of regularities, with Hume’s (1978: 490) account of property being an early example, and Lewis’ (1969) account of conventions being another. Contemporary versions of this kind of approach are however more common in economics than in social ontology.

At least given a broadly nominalist starting-point, the standard model is *prima facie* unattractive. While it starts with (A) particular individuals holding certain attitudes and ends with (B) particular individuals holding certain deontic statuses, it goes from (A) to (B) via an abstract and general type of entity, rules, whose ontological status is often highly unclear. In this paper, it will be argued that we can get from (A) to (B) without this detour into the abstract and the general. We can do without the level of rules in accounting for institutions or institutional facts. Of course, one might not generally think that we should take a broadly nominalist approach to metaphysical matters, and there is no room here for arguing that we should; but at the very least, given that many do find such an approach attractive, there seems to be reason to explore the possibility of a broadly nominalist approach to social ontology.

1. Why consider nominalism in social ontology?

While social ontology is arguably a species of metaphysics, the question of nominalism is rarely discussed there. One reason for this is probably that the type of entities studied in social ontology tend to be much more complex than the ones considered in debates over nominalism. For instance, one important form of nominalism is trope theory (see Maurin 2002). Tropes are simple, particular, and
abstract. This then means that the kinds of objects and properties that we encounter in daily life are arguably not directly characterizable in terms of tropes – at the very least, they are not simple, but have a variety of constitutive parts. Accordingly, when turning from fundamental metaphysics to a domain-specific metaphysics like social ontology, there is little reason to expect, even given that we believe that tropes are the ultimate building-blocks of reality, that the notion of tropes will be useful in identifying the building-blocks of social reality – the latter entities are bound to be highly complex complexes already to begin with. Whether we reject the existence of universals or not would accordingly seem to have little bearing on social ontology.

There is however another main understanding of nominalism as well (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2015), namely as involving the rejection of abstract objects, and where these are typically understood as non-spatiotemporal and causally inert objects. This sense of nominalism is at least at first sight more directly relevant, since the rules in question seem to be precisely such abstract objects. While a specific community, collectively accepting or recognizing certain rules, would certainly be spatiotemporally located, the rules themselves are not – rather they make up an institution that could be collectively accepted at different times and in different places. The rules do not cause me to hold a particular set of rights and duties – they play a constitutive role instead. Here it should however be noted that social ontologists do not tend to explicate the more exact ontological status that the relevant rules are supposed to have. They could merely be an explanatory device that we use, presumably for pragmatic reasons, to facilitate our understanding of concrete institutions, but where the idea is not that those rules are ultimately part of what makes it true that I hold certain rights and duties. Given that type of ap-
approach, perhaps social ontologists could even be quietists about abstract objects, leaving it open whether the rules which are appealed to in order to make sense of concrete institutions are ultimately more than pragmatically convenient explanatory devices.

However, at least given that one is drawn to a broadly nominalist approach, whether in terms of rejecting universals or rejecting abstract objects or both, this kind of quietism is arguably unsatisfactory. Even if fundamental metaphysics and social ontology are in many ways different enterprises, they are still both parts of a complete account of reality, and it seems reasonable that we would prefer such a complete account to exhibit what might be called meta-theoretical congruence. For instance, unless there is any positive specific reason for why the list of theoretical virtues will differ between different species of metaphysics, the working assumption would be that it is the same list. Additionally, if there are certain type of explanatory models that we think make sense in one case, they should ceteris paribus make sense more generally as well – indeed, the extent to which a certain explanatory model makes sense in one case should partly depend on the extent to which it makes sense in other cases as well. One thing that characterizes a broadly nominalist approach is a commitment to what might called the primacy of the particular in how one seeks to explain things, i.e., even if we speak in abstract and general terms about certain matters, or sometimes understand particular events in term of our knowledge about certain regularities, the direction of explanation (in the metaphysical sense) ultimately runs from the level of the particular. Unless there are specific reasons for not doing so, the default type of explanation would be of this kind, not just in fundamental metaphysics, but also in areas like social ontology. To the extent that we can achieve such meta-theoret-
ical congruence, it will arguably have bearing on fundamental metaphysics as well, further strengthening the case for pursuing that direction of explanation there.

2. Doing without rules

A main reason for nominalist approaches tends to be Ockhamite, at least if we are already working with concrete objects: why postulate abstract objects unless we really have to? In the case of the standard model of institutions, it seems clear that the ontology in question already includes concrete objects, namely human individuals like you and me. We presumably relate to each other in a variety of ways and the question, then, is if we have to postulate certain abstract objects, rules, in order to make sense of the statuses we hold. Although there will not be room here to develop the argument in detail (for more, see Brännmark 2019), this does not seem to be the case.

To begin with, it needs to be noted that in terms of deontic statuses, we are talking here about rights and duties that have a real existence, not rights and duties that we should have, but ones we do have as a matter of social fact. Let us start with a simple example of how social rights and duties can be established in terms of how we develop certain expectations: You walk across my lawn while I am standing on it. I do not protest, I just say hello. You do it again. I do not protest, I just say hello. And then this continues. Eventually we are at a point where it makes sense to say that you have an informal right, mutually recognized, to walk across my lawn. If after several years, I suddenly would protest, it would be I rather than you who needed to explain my behavior. The reason is that by then certain stable expectations have formed. We could of course say that
what has happened is that a certain rule has become established (you are allowed to walk across my lawn), but in order to understand the situation, saying this appears explanatorily redundant. All we need to say is that because of certain regularities being in place, certain expectations have been formed and gradually solidified. In fact, postulating the existence of a rule that we both accept just seems to add to our explanatory burden: Exactly when did we get to the point where the rule was established? In exactly what sense do we accept it? What is the exact content of the rule?

Although a precise tracking of such mechanisms of synchronizing and coordinating social expectations will be more difficult on a societal level, there seems to be no principled reason against thinking in terms of this kind of explanatory model on that level as well. By looking at how we gradually adjust our expectations on each other, and how we come to synchronize and coordinate these expectations so that enough people hold similar expectations, certain regularities might be established. For instance, an institution like the family clearly involves a range of expectations on what individuals occupying certain roles should or should not do, and where by a massive amount of interactions stretching far back in time, we as individuals have gradually modified our expectations into a state where we are, at least on the whole, relatively synchronized and coordinated even on a societal level. Now, if we understand our statuses as flowing from certain rules we would presumably think that, say, being a father or being a mother comes with certain rights and duties and that these are then, ceteris paribus, the same for all fathers and all mothers. On the alternative nominalist approach, however, the main relation obtaining between the statuses that we hold as individuals will be similarity or resemblance, not sameness. It can make sense to speak of what is typically involved in being a father or being a mother, but
ultimately different fathers and mothers will have somewhat different rights and duties, in terms of the social expectations that they face, depending on their more exact concrete circumstances. The deontic statuses that they hold come from below rather than from above, so to speak.

One consequence of adopting this kind of approach would be that it becomes natural to understand institutions as temporally extended complex concrete objects. Identity over time will not be about how the same set of rules are instantiated at a series of different time-points, but about continuity and connectedness throughout this temporally extended object. In fact, to the extent that we were to generalize rules from the patterns of expectations that obtain at different time points, these rules could, and probably would, be different at different times. Such differences would however then be about that particular institution being differently shaped at different times, not about a series of different institutions (qua systems of rules) consecutively being in place. Exploring this consequence in more detail, however, is something that will have to be left for another occasion.

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