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HISTORY'S MOVEMENT:
*THE HISTORICAL ONTOLOGY IN
SOCIAL ONTOLOGY*

BENNETT GILBERT

Portland State University

Portland | Oregon | USA

bbg2@pdx.edu

orcid.org/0000-0001-8295-3216

Social ontology and the philosophy of history both concern themselves with human collectives. Social ontology is supposed to be theoretical, although the social sciences are supposed to be empirical. Philosophy of history is supposed to be theoretical, although historiography is supposed to be empirical. In fact, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* mix in both theoretical and empirical endeavors in similar ways. Since the two endeavors hold part of their objects of inquiry in common, they should be able to speak to another. In what follows I aim to expose some of the ways their dialogue stresses and can nourish them both. Critical social ontology can enhance the moral purchase of social ontology. Re-conceiving ontology for social ontology must rely on developing an orientation toward diachronesis and history.

*Ethics — Moral philosophy — Social ontology — Historicity —
Critical theory — Personalism — Phenomenology — Philosophy of
history — Pragmatism — Josiah Royce — Emmanuel Levinas*

ARTIGO

O MOVIMENTO DA HISTÓRIA: A ONTOLOGIA HISTÓRICA NA ONTOLOGIA SOCIAL

BENNETT GILBERT

Portland State University

Portland | Oregon | USA

bbg2@pdx.edu

orcid.org/0000-0001-8295-3216

Tanto a ontologia social quanto a filosofia da história tratam de coletividades humanas. A ontologia social é considerada teórica, embora as ciências sociais sejam consideradas empíricas. A filosofia da história é considerada teórica, embora a historiografia seja considerada empírica. De fato, o *a priori* e o *a posteriori* se misturam de modos similares tanto nas empreitadas teóricas quanto nas empíricas. Já que ambas as empreitadas compartilham parte de seus objetos de investigação, elas deveriam ser capazes de se comunicar uma com a outra. No que segue, eu pretendo expor algumas das maneiras pelas quais o diálogo entre ambas as tensiona e pode nutri-las. A ontologia social crítica pode fortalecer a tração moral da ontologia social. Reconceber a ontologia para a ontologia social deve depender do desenvolvimento de uma orientação para a diacronia e a história.

*Ética — Filosofia Moral — Ontologia Social — Historicidade —
Teoria Crítica — Personalismo — Fenomenologia — Filosofia da
História — Pragmatismo — Josiah Royce — Emmanuel Levinas*

HISTORY IN SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

This paper is programmatic. It envisions a program for social ontology by which it can add to its rather dry scientific or technical form a robust and explicit moral perspective that, in my view, requires engagement with historical actuality. Both the deep connections between philosophy of history and moral philosophy, for which I have argued at length, on the one hand and the methodological details of a research agenda are not in the scope of this inquiry. Instead, it will envision the basic critique and reparative concepts on which to found the program I propose.

Any theory of the nature of collectives of human persons would seem to have need of the theory and study of history, because historiography gives us accounts of such collectives as crowds, tribes, cultures, societies, and civilizations, as well as of individuals in relation to the eras and groups to which they belonged or that they influenced. Historians and theorists of history think intensively about what kind of existences our collectives are, because they must do so in order to write about them and because what they discover in their researches is necessary to inform our understanding of social feeling, thinking, and acting. For their parts, theorists of social ontology would seem to require such concrete knowledge and philosophical armature as historiographic endeavor produces in order to speak coherently about social entities. The historical past itself (as distinct from historical studies for present purposes) is the sum of human behavior. This fact has led philosophers of history into massive speculative projects; but, setting aside those endeavors during the canonical period of the field and some other more recent attempts as well, our past is part of the actual substance of every collective project. Furthermore, memory of the past and reflection on history is an ineluctable and extremely powerful force in social formation through the vast ocean of human communication and persuasion.

The lines of linkage between philosophy of history and social ontology carry us yet further. The core problem to which scholars address work in social ontology is that of the nature of the being of collectives of human persons and of communal human endeavors. Speaking generally, this is built upon the ambition of ontology to describe the most general structures or features of what are variously denoted as objects, beings, or reality. Social ontologists select social objects or social reality, as opposed to objects or reality in their universal senses, on which to train their ontological inquiry. The reason is that they desire to address the issues of the ontological status of human groups and group behaviors, in order to learn about how societies can succeed rather than fail, and how communal combinations of persons may bring well-being, rather than the awful harms of which history speaks, that we see each day, and that always threaten our flourishing. The social ontologists Lynn Baker, Heikki Ikäheimo, Arto Laitinen, Eric Olson, Michael Quante, Dieter Sturma, and Italo Testa, and others are also deeply concerned with personhood as part of sociality (Ikäheimo; Laitinen 2007, 6-16). Social ontology thereby addresses the ways in which the study of our behaviors toward one another and toward our encompassing world might reveal the alterations in ontological status, that teach us and express to us, and perhaps not seldom cause, the effects that our actions have on actual others, all of whom are fully vulnerable and cherishable. It thus, must align itself with the other social sciences by admitting, as João Ohara has argued, that there is among them a “family resemblance”, through which one form or another of historical reaches to each field (Ohara 2022, 32-33, 38-40), especially in the study of former colonial subjects, whose conditions heighten their awareness of historicity

(Ohara 2022, 2). In short, social ontology, like all intellectual work, is a part of the stream of history, having influence on others. Therefore, It must be historicized.

For it is not possible to include empirical evidence in synchronic analyses without diachronic understanding, since all the evidence has passed through temporal intervals. This raises the question of whether the line between the synchronic and the diachronic is not simply blurry or wavering, but featherweight, merely bureaucratic. Many of the considerations this paper raises bear on this question, but the argument here does not focus on it.

Instead, I want to direct this essay toward an issue that I judge to be vastly more important. To understand this, first consider that, since the ethical or political is an inseparable and fundamental part of human societies, which are the objects of social ontology, we should consider this ethical aspect when looking for any of the structures that social ontology seeks, because ontology requires fundamental structures. There are many ways to state this issue of moral and political force in the project of social ontology, but here is the way of stating this, by Emmanuel Levinas, that is the keynote I will argue for and develop:

It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another (Levinas 1985, 80; italics his).

For the moment, it does not matter how good a summary of the basic ethical problem of human relationships this is. Here Levinas asks what it is from which society “results.” This sense of “result” is concerned with the effects of historical forces driving the genesis (or genealogy) of society, rather than with questions of the logic, or validity, in Martin Jay’s useful terms, by which a society structures itself (Jay 2021). We can see in Levinas’ question that ontologizing societal entities requires us to look at social ontology from or through the territory of ethics because the basic drives of human behavior motivate group actions toward group members and others. We act upon judgments as to the consequences for ourselves or for our group of the great forces developed in the psychic and social dynamics of group activity. This is the source of much of the drama of human affairs. The moral life of peoples is a body of historical evidence and a part of the philosophy of history that social ontology cannot bypass since it must rely upon the historical in the ways I have stated above.

Next, consider how this matter of the moral limitations of predation and power and the moral obligations of persons for society (or any such formulation) that is taken up by social ontology as descriptively a fundamental and pervasive feature of human societies relates to the methods of ontology. This locus of ethical reflection, although inevitably in the epistemic purview of social ontology and also applicable to any ontologically examined social entity, is not one of the evident topics of ontology. We sometimes intuit links, but we have no assessment at hand of the validity of parallels between ontology and ethics, as, for example, whether universals and particulars are to one another as are societies and individuals. Problems of moral constraints on competition and power in social groups and affordances for cooperation and empathy in social groups form an issue we might call onto-ethical in so far as the norms of behaviors shape the activities and the forms of being of collectives, but this is a hope that does not necessarily license us

to proceed very far. So, although Levinas' ethical question is a topic for social ontology and can be related or applied to all objects of inquiry of social ontology, there so far seems to be nothing in it that addresses ontological classes or structures. But maybe this appearance is a bad mix-up. Ethics is ontologically valent mostly in regard to the existence-status of values. Social ontology might produce descriptive accounts of social ethics as part of the objects of ontological inquiry, but these are objects of empirical study in the method and manner of the social sciences, as conventionally conceived. It might be that the problem of values passes over into metaphysics, which, whether one defends metaphysics or considers it impossible or requires it to be restricted to unifying scientific knowledge, as James Ladyman and Don Ross do, concerns something other than what is strictly empirical (Ladyman *et al.*, 2007).

Thus, something that is fundamental and pervasive to the interests of social ontology, being a featureful and consequential part of the structure of human behavior, to wit, the historical record of the moral life of collectives, does not seem to be available to the kind of work to which most social ontology is directed. By "kind of work," I mean the general metaphysics (and/or metametaphysics) that philosophers conduct in the analytic tradition. Pre-modern metaphysics often included a framework that grounded moral values. Metaethics, conducted by the analytic method, broadly speaking, also considers the status of ethical laws and values. But so far we have not seen a way to license social ontology to regard moral feeling or thinking as anything other than an object of empirical study. If the ethical is the part of social ontology that the nature of human historicity suggests it is, we want something beyond description, the results of which can be incorporated into part of the social ontological inquiry into the status of such social objects as institutions, laws and money, and groups according to race and gender or other categories, and into the many problems of the public status of knowledge.

It therefore is the case that we ought not to separate at some important level the ethical positions inhering in social ontology from the ethical views inhering in the historical formation of social entities. The issue that I regard as more important than the evidentiary affordances of the historical for social ontology is how do fundamental existential structures, i.e., those discovered by ontology through analytic and other methods, reveal or contain not only accounts of our moral life but further—much further—the guidance that social ontologists, like the rest of us, seek in *morally* reflecting on the sum of human behavior that is history? Historians can and often do "specialize," as Arthur Alfaix Assis puts it, in "decoding" the "cultural webs...proximate to subjective experience..." that shape the "patterns of meaning" in societies and cultures (Alfaix Assis 2023, 9). Historical experience, knowledge, and reflection puts this pressure on the conduct of social ontology. Likewise social ontology calls to historiography. The two dialogically stress and push one another. I will build an account to this dialogue of social ontology and philosophy of history by way of critical social ontology and, in addition, the critique of philosophy by phenomenology and by American Pragmatism.

CRITICAL SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Let us look at another side to the matter. This second consideration moves us further from the kinds of categories and puzzling problems associated with ontology. For it does not concern social ontology as a body of topics of which social ethics or onto-ethics is one. Instead, it concerns what the social ontologist does. The ethical and political question reaches out from the confines of the logic of ontology just as it reaches out from the demands of descriptive empirical study. Because the object of this onto-ethical discourse is the happiness and unhappiness of societies, it is also not solely a discourse about people's ethics. It is an ethical discourse, a body of discursive actions that have ethical import—that is, it responds to our ethical needs by representing the principles, forms, and drives of collective human relations in critical and more or less abstract form. Even very abstract thinking, like all speech, exercises power. This was a lesson of J. L. Austin's investigation of speech acts. As Nancy Bauer, writing about Austin, puts it,

[...] our utterances are not well understood if we confine ourselves to speaking about them in terms of truth and falsity or value and fact. For these utterances are intimately tied up both with our power to justify or enforce them and with our tendency to reposition ourselves with respect to them when we are challenged (Bauer 2015, 96).

Philosophical work, situated in history, about society does itself participate in ongoing social processes.

Even further, the social ontologist is herself a moral agent in everything she does, having the ethical obligations of a member of various social groups. The fact is that the work that social ontology does has consequences in the world. It shapes the mind of the public actor who is a social ontologist, if nothing else. But of course it adds to the ongoing mentality of her groups, her society and nation, and of humankind in its advance on the future. These consequences and the consequences of any and all moral principles are real and true in the lives of actual humans, regardless of which of the many metaethical positions we take about their reality or irreality. Every philosopher is socially, and hence morally, situated. The social ontologist is doubly so since her object is the nature of social and hence those moral situations arising from and in societies. Social ontology exists as part of the mission of philosophy to help people to lead good lives. It would have little purpose otherwise. But it never is otherwise, except by pretending to be value-free. We are all inside the vast human honeycomb.

Social ontology has real moral purchase because it is part of the epistemic and theoretical base that affects the lives of societies, although in that long and indirect way in which scholarship affects daily life more often than not. It has therefore a normative ethical function, desired or not, as well as a descriptive one, because work in the field expresses the higher-order religious, moral, or political commitments of its philosophers and also in so far as work in the field has a causal or para-causal effect on human society. Now, this is true to varying intensities of many, probably all, intellectual endeavors. But some work is closer to the bone than others—or at least it seems useful to see this on a sliding or grey scale so as to mitigate the ways in which ideology or even actual consequences may hamper free inquiry. It is not really possible, if we are to be honest about the morality of our

actions, not to think that certain forms of inquiry bear very high degrees of direct responsibility. Social ontology has especially strong moral obligations, much as political science has, because its work concerns the loci of direct responsibility for others. It evaluates them as concrete forms of intersubjectivity and community in terms of modes or types of being. Because these objects of its inquiry are ethically constituted by actors, social ontology is not just “merely” responsible as any other discipline ought to be. Its object is both the ethical views held by actors when constituting their communal and public entities and also the prescriptive consequences of its own contextualization of these matters in the abstract field of concepts peculiar to it.

The position of heightened moral responsibility that lies upon social ontology is similar to the particularly intense position of history, in which historians are exactly the agents of historicization. Theodor Adorno put it this way:

The substance of intellectual and cultural forms—and philosophy itself is just such a form, something mediated and created by human beings rather than some immediate manifestation of truth—is inevitably indexed historically, and inevitably reveals a certain historical meaning. And whatever may be eternal or of enduring significance about such forms can only be preserved insofar as it changes in the course of history, insofar as it is penetrated by history (Adorno 2019, 165).

The work of historians is a pure distillation of what anyone working on any synchronic structure does: it shapes its object as it perdures through its tradition. Social ontology does this as well, with all the responsibility, authority, and prescriptive power that its objects have or might have in their transformations through social reality. There is a variety of social ontology that is developed upon just this understanding of the matter, that is, that it cannot free itself from that responsibility. This is critical social ontology.¹ It is a social ontology that, as I see it, takes up the peculiar power and responsibility of historical studies to shape collective memory and to constitute identity. We just do not merely observe values; we make them even when we think we are being objective outside observers. Society, like history, acts upon itself, shaping itself.

By combining critical theory with ontology, this approach to the forms, modes, and status of social entities requires a perspicuous understanding of their diachronic development and constitution. Critical theory itself is a philosophy of history; its critique of reason is a way of evaluating the effect of ideas and practices on the history of human development. It was no accident that Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse were deeply aware of the problems and potentials of philosophy of history as a way of looking at specific cultural situations and colligatory overviews of the stages of society. All of four of these philosophers wrote influential books about historicity, universal history, and dialectical history. In a perceptive paper, Joshua Lee Harris defines critical social ontology in this way:

¹ Not everyone will agree with my view of critical social ontology as prescriptive. But I think that eliding its prescriptivity in favor of some euphemism for it avoids moral responsibility almost as much as do supposedly objective or scientific forms of social research.

[...] the basic idea is that we need to attend to the distinctive being, essences and powers of social phenomena if we are to account adequately for their effects, especially those bearing on matters of social justice.
 [...] critical social ontology is marked in these three ways: namely, its (1) constitutive “concern for social transformation” [...]; (2) commitment to ontological analysis of social entities; and (3) group realism (Harris 2021, 1-2).

If the goal of social critique is commitment and action for a better and more just and peaceful world, then it is an ethical endeavor, prescriptively so and not just a description of what people do and think about ethics. The desired result of social ontology might be social justice as it is for Sally Haslanger (although her method is analytic), or it might be Deweyan progress as it is for Rahel Jaeggi, or it might be something else (Haslanger 2012; Jaeggi 2018). Because “Critical social ontologists think that social things do things in the world” and have real effects, social entities are real in just this sense at the minimum (Harris 2021, 2). Describing these moral realities is deeply raveled with a desire and then the prescription to do something to ameliorate them. Under the influence of Marxism, material and social reality transform philosophy itself, so that it can conceive and advance human society, so social ontology must surely follow as agent and patient of transformation.

I have referred specifically to moral realities. This is not to say that critical social ontologists do not think that social entities have material or other kinds of reality, as virtually all of them and most social ontologists of any stripe do not regard them as only ideally real. But they are not directly visible and so are subject to speculation and mediation even more than most physical things and are in a sense the interpretive situation that subsumes all other interpretations since knowledge and understanding are socially produced. But moral imperatives propel critical social ontology. Adorno thought that one’s own suffering can, through losing one’s potential well-being, breed in a person a motivating conviction “that things should be different” because “Unrest makes knowledge move” (Adorno 2004, 203). For Adorno critical theory is itself in general “a kind of self-reflection of the historical process” and specifically “a hermeneutic of a failed form of life,” which is modern commodity exchange capitalism that dismembers social reality into meaninglessness (Honneth 2009, 49, 55). For marxissant thinking, analytic approaches pretend to false political neutrality and too deeply hide the political and moral history and nature of the ideas and of the situations of those philosophers who practice these approaches.

What I will call general social ontology, on the other hand, has moral valence but does not, as a general rule, ground its ethical impulses in any way (Collins 2019; Hirvonen 2020; Oyowe 2022). It is a fair bet that the argument I make in the first part of this paper surprises most general social ontologists and that they likely resist my claims. It is true that a division between the two approaches need not often be sharp or inflexible. But the reflexivity whereby the historian or the anthropologist becomes aware of her moral situatedness is not part of the theory of general social ontology, whereas such awareness is part of the theory and practice of most forms of critical theory. Since such awareness is in this sense unresolved or occluded, the moral aspects of general social ontology are not integrated into the ontology. It cannot digest its moral valence, but critical theory’s critique of metaphysics and ontology makes room for its moral commitments and is in many ways motivated by

them. This leaves general social ontology self-satisfied or weak in gaining a self-critical foothold. But the Marxist commitment to moral ends, though not theorized as moral prescription (or “moralism”), would strengthen its openness to salient forms of self-critique, as would most general theories of normative ethics.² Critical theory and hence critical social ontology are immanent critique, so that they describe the conflicts in the values held by social entities and they prescribe resolutions, however much they regard or claim to regard their prescriptions as scientific. They apply the prescriptive affordances of immanent critique also to a philosopher’s evaluation of her own experience and choices.

Observing that the prescriptive element in critical social ontology is valuable, present, and ineluctable, though, leads to another problem. The question of the basis of the ethical values that leftist critiques in the Marxist tradition prescribe to scholars, exactly parallel to those it prescribes to activists and to citizens, has been a problem since Marx himself and arguably since the Young Hegelians. Other leftist traditions use different higher-order commitments to come to grips with this, and some Marxian philosophical analyses dismiss the problem. But in the main it remains. As Axel Honneth points out, a reconstructive process cannot necessarily justify its ideals and might well not be in the business of doing so by its nature because in any immanent process an “extra step” is required (Honneth 2009, 50). The extra step, however, is a very large one: “grounding” values raises fundamental, profound, ancient, and unending core problems of moral philosophy and general philosophy.

We can see this specifically in critical social ontology in the work of Rahel Jaeggi, where, as Italo Testa points out, acts of critique are intrinsically normative ones (Testa 2021, 163). Testa concludes that while the tension between the empirical and the prescriptive tasks of Jaeggi’s work “may involve a category mistake,” it is certainly a real political and ethical problem “while the world is being violently denormativized” (Testa 2021, 173). Can and should social ontology be prescriptive? Is it necessarily so? And if it is to be so, on what basis does it choose values to prescribe? How can the historical past help to provide this basis?

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

If social ontology must be ethical in the way I have suggested and if ethics and ontology have a difficult mutual fit, then “ontology” in “social ontology” must itself be considered and considered in the context of the development of ontology in modern philosophy.

The re-evaluation of the history of Occidental philosophy as an ontological metaphysics that comprises the sciences and philosophy and theology as they developed together since Plato is a form of metametaphysics in a literal sense of the word, although there is not much of it in the disciplinary literature on metametaphysics. Martin Heidegger began this re-evaluation of traditional metaphysics and ontology in *Being and Time* in 1927, from which the notion of historicity will play a role in what follows both in Heidegger and as it was developed by Paul Ricœur and others (Heidegger 1962, sec. 72-77). Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas carried it forward. All of this work critically considers the worth

² Views on what Marx’s normative grounds are, if he has or has need of any at all, sharply differ.

of what is called metaphysics both in its pre-Kantian forms and in contemporary analytic metaphysics just as much as Ladyman and Ross, David Chalmers, and others have done in traditions other than the existential-phenomenological approach begun by Heidegger, although the application of this to analytic metaphysics is perhaps less obvious.³ My approach here focuses on the critique of metaphysics as a critique of ontology made by Levinas, who both agrees and disagrees with Heidegger, and its affordances for a processual, rather than a “thing,” ontology. It will also refer to contemporary phenomenologists and to germane ideas from the American Pragmatist tradition.

Levinas’ devotes his most systematic work, *Totality and Infinity*, to this critique, but he also importantly reviewed and supplemented it in his 1985 essay “Diachrony and representation” (Levinas 1998, 175-193; Levinas 2007). In brief, Levinas holds that the philosophical thinking associated with metaphysics and ontology aims to grasp its objects in full and with total comprehension, as driven by its own logic. To do this, being must be present to the subject: legible, visible, available to inspection, and transparent to it. This is the “totality” by which metaphysics seeks to control the world in a way that Levinas says amounts to war, metaphorical and literal. It bounds and limits, and hence is contrasted with, infinity. In “Diachrony” Levinas calls it “egology,” which synthesizes its objects into a totality that I make mine by keeping it “present” in order for me to re-present it under my control. This includes scientific observation and conceptualization. “The other becomes the *I*’s very own in knowledge” and leads to “the reduction of the Other to the Same” (Levinas 1998, 161; italics his). This is Levinas’ route to a profound moral philosophy, but of course I cannot do justice here to the power and reach of this line of thought.

For Levinas, human relations are based in the uncircumscribed ethical demand of another on each of us, or “infinity,” in which the distance of otherness is incompassable, rather than subject to totalized systems of rational knowledge. This conception should point social ontologists toward the agentive aspects of the formation of social entities because the field of interpersonal activity is the field of ethical action. Social groups and institutions are made by human persons as responsive actors amidst historical, highly contingent resources and circumstances that necessarily make our lives, actions, and creations highly fragile and vulnerable. The fears arising from our temporality, finitude, and vulnerability in turn shape social entities because these must generally be fortified, by thinking them through and by trial and error, against mishap and catastrophe from human and more-than-human forces. Thinking with Levinas, theorists ought to look for the ways in which persons choose to act “*for* one another” and the degrees and manners of each way in which public and private actions produce social entities. People orient themselves toward groups of others; this is part of the cradle of their actions and is wholly the anthropogenic matrix that stamps the social entities they create, whether in good will or in enmity. This sense of open-ended structure following from attention to people as agents is based not on the forms of reasoning internal to ontology but instead on the real effects of our actions upon one another as understood under the

³ In the anthology *Metametaphysics*, ed. Chalmers, *et al.*, this “Continental” metametaphysics is represented, though as a minority or outside voice, by one paper, Kris McDaniel’s “Ways of Being” (2009, 290-319), which develops the Heideggerian attack on metaphysics in concordance with the analytic approach that fills most of the volume.

most basic and universal interpersonal ethical demand to which all human activity is subject — our obligations to the survival of others — and that, standing apart from abstract theorizing, each natural and social contingency throughout history provokes.

Two forces are at work: the fundamentality (or “universality”) of the ethical relationship that underlies interpersonal and socializing, whether it is fulfilled or abandoned, and the various changing circumstances in which agents act. The agent’s openness is due to *both* the intrinsic “infinity” of the ethical demand on the one hand and on the other to the ongoing time horizon of human existence, in which new events ignite changes in social entities. It is true, of course, that finitude is our temporality. But one of the most important unique features of social entities is that they are transgenerational, which, stretching beyond the finitude of individuals, also constitutes our history. In this perspective, the emphasis falls on process, for historical processes constitute the ideational and material structures we develop in order to understand the mode of being of social entities and of forms of life. Their mode of being is historical rather than purely conceptual. It is the historical that calls us to the “ancient” and perennial “large step” of thought that cannot be solved as if it were an equation.

In summary, we find two principal ideas for social ontology from this critique of ontology: first, to think about the moral agency of persons as necessary to the being of social entities; and second to think about this in terms of temporalities and history. Both have their roots in phenomenology. I will briefly look at some recent phenomenology in order to consider how social ontology might beneficially take up the historical agentive if it is to respond to this form of critique; and for the second point, although historicity became an important part of modern philosophy as an existential-phenomenological idea, I will turn to pragmatism to develop it in what follows.

Reviewing the development of phenomenological interest in the social, we find that it does not explore its historical processes although it seems to recognize them. Thomas Szanto argues that because phenomenology studies the world as “given in subjective experience,” its analyses of empathy and life-communities has a strong political (or, as I call it, ethical or moral) interest lacking in “standard...contemporary” (i.e., general) social ontology (Szanto 2020, 292, 294). The question for social ontology in this framework is the relations of the subjective experience of collective or “nonindividual agents” to that of individuals (Szanto 2020, 294). Phenomenology develops its understanding of social entities as *gebunden Zusammensein* in terms of their requiring reciprocity, their non-linguistic as well as their linguistic forms, intersubjective constitution, and the role of common goals and needs (Szanto 2020, 298-306). Others “concern us,” such that “collective intentionality” involved our cognitive, affective, and reasoning skills (Szanto 2020, 308). The account of individuals and of collectives that Szanto’s phenomenology offers is therefore organized around the ethical aspect of sociality — around our empathy, care, and political action for one another. This is meant to resolve the primary question of social ontology as to how to conceive the being of collectives that are manifestly made up of individuals (Szanto 2020, 294-311). Szanto argues that the rooting of phenomenology of intersubjectivity in first-person experience gives it the power to resolve this primary question. Here, then, persons are the agents whose moral, affiliative, and political concerns bring social entities into being. This necessarily expands what social ontology might mean by “ontology,” but it avoids

the possible axiological affordances of historical experience that obviously accompany interpersonality (Szanto 2020, 295).

This enable us to hold that meaningfulness is the heart of a life-world and making meaning requires intersubjectivity. Shaun Gallagher emphasizes “participatory sense-making.” The presence of others shapes our attention to the world (Gallagher 2020, 302). This in turn should lead theorists to introduce the concept of recognition that has such a weight presence in standard social ontology, linking it to phenomenology (Ikäheimo; Laitinen 2011). Recognition, from the time of its roots in Hegel, has a distinctively diachronic character. “Participatory sense-making” is a way of looking at the social entities as being not objects but processes—highly sophisticated organic, cognitive, affective, psychic, and ethico-political processes. It is a true historiographic concept, one that is highly useful and that historians use every day. This fits thinking with Levinas about acting “*for* one another.”

A PRAGMATIST VIEW OF SOCIAL ONTOLOGY: JOSIAH ROYCE

These phenomenological approaches take one far from the traditional focus of ontology on essence. What kind of ontology is left to social ontology in this ethical framework?

To develop this, I will turn to some aspects of American Pragmatism as well as to some aspects of philosophy of history, understood not as a study of historiographic methodology but as a field of philosophical consideration of the nature of social knowledge and of human behavior. As Colin Koopman writes in his fine book on the thinking concerning historicity among the American Pragmatists, once you start to look for process in pragmatism you see it everywhere in James and his successors (Koopman 2009). Philosophy of history has lately paid a lot of attention to the pragmatist tradition (Kuukkanen *et al.*, 2019). John Dewey’s work describes and prescribes, a process of human social development that has inspired Jaeggi and other social ontologists who place him as the field’s proximate founder (Testa 2017). But one important name is missing from these works: that of Josiah Royce, whose metaphysics of social relations was so intense and thorough that he must be considered a founder of the field, at least in the Anglosphere. To omit him is an historical error (Valisnier; van der Veer 2000, 200).

By the time of his late lecture series on *Metaphysics* in 1915-1916, Josiah Royce had been influenced to make a partial exit out of his earlier absolute idealism by William James, his close friend, and by the work of C. S. Peirce. James began pragmatism as an intense, though genial, subversion of traditional ontology and metaphysics (Royce 1998). Royce at this point sees metaphysics through sociality. Knowledge is social, being built up by a community of interpreters, such as Peirce had analyzed through his idea of his triadic relationships of communications. The socially-oriented turn toward communications as the processual reality of social entities historicizes the matter in a far-reaching way. It is a source of the idea of the social history and social ontology of knowledge. Indeed, the single most prominent Anglophone philosopher of history for most of the twentieth century, R. G. Collingwood, had explicitly used a socio-historical framework for the social construction of knowledge in 1940, in one of his last works (Collingwood 1998).

Toward the end of his investigations into the metaphysics of social reality and relations, Royce wrote this most interesting and original statement of the core question of ontological metaphysics: “What essences are such that the existence of the corresponding objects is required?” (Royce 1998, 267). This definition is strictly pragmatist, even functionalist; it puts essences and categories at the service of historical existence, in a way reminiscent of Nietzsche’s insistence that history serves humanity and that humanity does not serve history and, as he put this thought elsewhere in the same essay, “Is life to dominate knowledge and science, or is knowledge to dominate life?” (Nietzsche 2007, 67, 121). In doing this, the force of Royce’s formula derives from the intuition that the particulars of the world are infinitely varied and ceaselessly changing, so that abstract conceptualization, if it is to be useful, has the task of tethering itself to its peculiar sort of description of “corresponding objects,” a type of description that at a stretch might possibly include some weak predictive power. Our knowledge of an essence “throws light,” as he puts it, on the existence of relevant entities. Such a metaphysics traces as abstractions (“essences”) whatever it is that exists that fits these abstractions. The value of these essences is that they fully and wholly lead us in our attempts to understand the real world to

[...] the complete expression of the meaning of every significant finite idea, so far as that idea has significance. This world of course is also monistic and pluralistic. This world of expressed significance is also the world of a community. The process of expressing significance is also a temporal process: it involves the gradual expression of meaning [...] (Royce 1998, 298).

Although Royce here still uses the language of absolute idealism, we can also see how the processual force of a pragmatist world-view has transformed *a priori* metaphysical categories into generalizations of *social entities* as these persist and transform through historical time. Indeed, Royce’s grip onto an older metaphysics, still hoping to preserve the Absolute and thereby including an idea of totality that Levinas and most of us reject, clarifies the problems of any metaphysics of things and substances or ontology of concepts and modes that is applied to social entities. Once the concept of essence is humanized as social commitment, ontology must be socialized and historicized. The very act of creating abstract ontology is a part of historical flow itself.⁴ Finding essences that “require” the existence of “corresponding objects” is nothing other than a way of finding meaning that groups of humans, in their loyalty to one another as Royce put it, that is, in their social affiliations, seek to express in terms adequate to their social collectivity by virtue of a sufficient useful level of generalization, as established by their communities of interpretation. Participatory sense-making is not possible without communication, which is not simply social in nature but which actively and forcefully shapes societies through the historical processes of production, transmission, storage, retrieval, and reception of information and of ideas. The ontology of social entities is founded in their temporality and is historical rather than abstract in nature.

⁴ Much of Thomas Nail’s *Being and Motion* (2018) is devoted to writing the history of ontology from precisely this principle.

Human agency in such communal form extends on the temporal plane through the life of social entities no less than it does in individual form in single lives. Pursuing this approach helps us to avoid the violence that totalizing and rationalistically controlled analyses from substance ontology tends to exercise. We should learn the lesson that understanding social entities in a phenomenological-diachronic manner tends to open us to their actual variety in a way that in the long run lessens harmful repression and conflict due to *a priori* or essentialist thinking based on establishing logical identities. When Levinas writes about our doing “*for*” one another, rather than “*to*” one another, certainly he means the care and compassion we might exercise; but this concept also enables us to extend analysis of social entities into our fundamental and ineliminable interdependence that is our history, even when we are exploiting, victimizing, or otherwise harming one another.

In this connection, avoiding univocity is one of the lessons that the study of history teaches us. Even Adorno found some optimism in his proscription of identity-thinking; Honneth says that he felt that sensitivity to one another grows by thinking from “the non-identical qualitative horizon of all objects” (Honneth 2009, 81-82). Joshua Harris argues that social ontology ought to “embrace a metaphysics that admits modes of existence” by not taking being as univocal (Harris 2021, 14). Citing Aristotle, he says that “*modes* of existence are what carve nature at its joints, not existence in general” (Harris 2021, 8). The phenomenological tradition when reflecting on history takes this approach. Paul Ricoeur, followed by David Carr, carefully investigated the ways in which people build social relationships through memory, narrative, and history (Ricoeur 1985; Carr 2014). Their leading idea is that human understanding, in both success and failure, arises from the temporalities in which we live. From this it follows that the agentive interpretation of social entities relies on an ontology of historicity, which is, in the end, the self-understanding we gain of intersubjectivity and our interdependence on one another. This is the existential basis of social entities.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

When taking into account the concrete manifold of history as the sum of human behavior, noting particularly the raveling of many temporalities in every person and collective and in each human activity or project, social ontologists are well advised to be cautious about generalizations and universal statements. These as such, even when they are stated as something short of “laws,” are essences; and valuable history-theoretic understanding includes a metametaphysical critique of essentialism in light of the logical and moral difficulties in totalizing logics. It is the case that some social ontologies, such as those of Ian Hacking and others include, consideration of temporal development (Hacking 1995). But unless one wishes to build speculative philosophies of history, even the imputation of “natural kinds” to social entities is parlous. They risk replacing messy existence with squared-up essences. Furthermore, the movement of intentions, behaviors, practices, beliefs, and identities cannot be summed up once for all. It is imprudent to impose one such analysis because all such once-for-all analyses might be and usually do share some part of the whole truth of the matter, as the phenomena they select to focus on are

co-present in the virtually infinite complexity of human action, as are such instruments of action as money, ideas, tools, laws, and speech acts. Finally, the many categories that the ontology of social entities uses trace different tracks between individualism and holism. This binary scheme is tied to totalizing logics and elides the deeper complex and irreducible processuality of joint human meaning-making. Taking a cue from Royce's definition of metaphysics stated above, essences must illuminate, rather than determine, existents under the sign of necessity taken as a forceful form of expressing human meaning and meaning-making.

The critique of metaphysics as it applies to ontology that I use here requires that we think past not only the binary of individual and whole but also past the oppositions between humans as agents and patients, producers and produced, meaning-making and socio-genetically determined. History moves in ways far too complicated for any of this, as study of human behavior plainly shows. But the issue that history's movements presents is deeper still. Humans are self-understanding beings. They seek self-understanding through their actions and productions and also through reflection on these. Both modes are intertwined. We are historical both by living through time in the accumulated conditioning effects of the past and also in knowing, reflecting, and choosing. We "experience" history, and we make history both by learning and by acting; all of this is included in our projects of self-understanding that are the contexts in which each next step and every further action is taken. Speaking generally, the moment we place our self-understanding under rationalized observation, we lose hold of it because we have abstracted it from our real historical lives or from the life-world (Overgaard; Zahavi 2007). This is a loss that good historical writing tries to overcome. Social entities are projects of self-understanding that act upon the world and are acted upon by persons.

All this is true enough upon the existential-phenomenological critique of "presence" and thing-ontology—and even somewhat anodyne at that. It is valuable for social ontology in establishing its rapport with historical thinking and theory because it takes into account an unrestricted actual historical range of transformations of individuals into communities and allows for many kinds of understanding of the ways in which collectives are meaningful as social entities. Without this perspective we risk social theory's losing from its analyses human agency in acting to change the world on the one hand and on the other the understanding that we use to choose and shape our actions, because these two modes are fully intelligible only in their interpenetration in human historicity. A degree of convergence between phenomenological and critical-theory critiques of metaphysics and ontology leads us to an understanding of human agency in history and of the value of historicity for social ontology. But what of my recommendation of history as an understanding of human behavior that offers a prescriptive purchase to social ontology?

When we presentify social entities, that is, treat them wholly as objects of empirical cognition, we are performing a metaphysics that cannot account for the intersubjective self-understanding that such a metaphysics separates into observer and observed, into *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, into fact and feeling, into history as the sum of human actions and history as the general form of reflective self-understanding. In history we face not presence but absence—absences multiplied in every direction by the different temporalities of actors, systems, nature. These absences are "the ambivalent becoming and perseverance of existence" (Carvalho Dias Leite 2023). This is above all true of humans in association with one

another, as all social commonality is inhabited by the divergences, and then the absences, and finally the losses to which these different temporalities lead. People contemporary with one another contend with each other's different cognitive and ontological and hence temporal realities (Dyring 2022, 12-14). They do share a world, in their various kinds of communities; but fragmentation and fracture condition all sharing. This fact ultimately is due to the diverging temporalities of the subjects who create social entities and of the natural world in which we must live. We call this change, common to all things, the pluralizing force of survival which we try to manage through community; and history is our experience of changeful perseverance (including all the losses) and our understanding of it.⁵ Through the society of one another we have resisted, accepted, and managed change in our project of self-understanding. José Ortega y Gasset put much of this in a nutshell:

[...] astronomy for example is not a part of the stellar bodies it researches and discovers, the peculiar life experience we call "life experience" is an essential part of life itself, constituting one of its principal components or factors (Ortega y Gasset 1984, 187).

Because what we experience becomes what we learn, and because what we learn becomes who and what we are, and because this becomes what we do, all in cycles of many temporalities, humans have an excess subjectivity. Call this "excess" our ability to produce and not solely be produced as effects of occurrent social and natural causes — the indeterminacy of our future. The philosopher Jason Read (following Étienne Balibar) calls this "transindividuality," "a differential force" that just is our capability for continuous agency, cooperation, cognitive growth, and renewal that creates community and all social entities as a metastable flux (Read 2011). This excess is held in common and is the pre-condition of the storage, communication, and retrieval of knowledge as it also is of the social memory and historical experience that constitutes social entities. Here, again, the philosophy of history can realize a genuine historic-theoretic principle that comes from social ontology.

This kind of processual perspective, this "metastability", is a deep attribute of personhood because it is a constituent part of human historicity. It is one way of understanding human sociality as our foundation for understanding social entities. For there is no community without intersubjectivity, and there is no intersubjectivity without subjects. Similarly, there are no persons without interpersonality and sociality, because the creation of social entities is a universal activity of persons, whom in turn social relations help to constitute. Personhood in these terms can be an ontological principle in the development of systems theory, which in turn, following Niklas Luhmann, can holistically illuminate human history as an autopoietic mega-collective of persons built up out of many "social wholes" (den

⁵ For one version of this concept a group of philosophers of history invented the term "chronocenosis" as "[...] a way of theorizing not simply the multiplicity but also the conflict of temporal regimes operating in any given moment. Our point is that power and time interface amid intensely competitive temporal formations, and not simply parallel or layered ones. This interface braces these temporal formations and their conflict, sometimes enforcing a particular temporal hierarchy, at others submitting to their breakdown and clash. We argue that power operates by arranging, managing, and scaling temporal regimes and conflicts. At the same time, these fault lines function as seams of structural weakness and possibility: power is often undone in the cut and thrust of temporal antagonisms (Edelstein *et al.*, 2020, 4).

Hollander 2012). The human person develops individual and collective mentalities in response to many more stimuli than her brain alone responds to, even though the cerebral cortex is itself the most complex organic structure in the Earth-system. Collectives are so much more exponentially complex and diverse that it is arguably not possible to understand the interacting multiple temporalities, intentionalities, contexts, and causalities that form them without understanding collectives as persons (Dupré 2000). To the extent that the ontology of social entities is to be understood through understanding the full range of historical actuality, this field of work with ontology logically should have moral commitments, among the perspectives it develops by grasping historical processes rather than entities as substances that the philosopher analyzes down to their essences from an objective distance.

Critical social ontology can be in a good position to bolster the moral purchase to which the philosophy of history can lead historiographic practice, provided that it recognize that every human society is a moral entity. Conventionally, critical theory is immanent, focused on exploring internal contradictions, and denies having any kind of “objective” warrant for value judgments. However, once any theoretical inquiry turns to actual history, any refusal of judgment both actuates a pretense of objectivity, denying the moral commitments of the theorist, and also can no longer escape the existential bases of our relations with past persons from which moral life arises.

The diachronic processes of single and corporate persons — of their affairs, ambitions, and adventures — turns the temporality of existence into human life. Both historical studies and theory and the studies and theories of the social sciences share this ground. It is a changeful ground. Because this ground is changeful rather than essential as a matter of ontology, the theoretical study of human collectives must bend to history. But, likewise, historical understanding must also, first, gain the understanding of the being of social entities that social-ontological theory supplies; and, second, bend toward the moral demands that the value of the human person obliges us to respect. Social ontology and philosophy of history as the enterprises that theorize their fields are thus in dialogue with one another as well as with the body of actualities they both aim to understand. In these actualities social ontology can seek our existential “excess,” our freedom. The resultant understanding cannot evade moral responsibility. It cannot lose the power of normative judgment. This loss would be a loss of hope.

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History's Movement

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