

Are There Really Social Causes?

Penultimate draft; Forthcoming in *Philosophy of Social Sciences* (Please cite published version)

August Faller

Abstract: This article investigates the causal efficacy of social properties, which faces the following puzzle. First, for both intuitive and scientific reasons, it seems social properties have causal import. But, second, social properties are also characteristically extrinsic: to have some social property depends, in typical cases, on what one's society is like around them. And, third, there is good reason to doubt that extrinsic properties make a genuine causal contribution. After elaborating on these three claims, I defend the following resolution to the puzzle: social causation occurs at the level at which social properties are intrinsic.

Does the social world matter, causally speaking? It certainly seems that social properties make a genuine difference. The onset of a recession causes some to lose their jobs, and the recession itself may have been caused by poor regulation of mortgage-backed securities. Further, some think we should hold banks accountable for their actions—the *banks'* actions—which seems to require that social entities like banks really make a difference, causally speaking.

Social properties are typically extrinsic in the sense that having a social property depends on the goings on in a larger social context. Corporations are incorporated within a larger legal context; money has value within a system of exchange; children are delinquents relative to background norms; etc.

The extrinsic character of social properties matters to the question of whether social properties genuinely contribute to causation. As we will see, there is good reason to think extrinsic properties cannot be counted as causes, at least in cases in which the relation is to something external to the bearer of the property. In other words, causation must be intrinsic to the cause and effect.

Taken together these three considerations present a puzzle. It seems we have

to give up one of the three: either social properties are not genuinely causal, are not extrinsic, or are not bound by the requirement that genuinely causal properties be intrinsic. What should one say if one sees the appeal of all three?

I argue that anyone who endorses all three ought to also endorse a kind of *social causal holism*: social causation occurs at the level at which social properties are intrinsic, which in many cases is the level of the society as a whole. I argue that causal holism offers the best hope for recognizing that there are genuine social causes, and so preserving intuitions about group agency and responsibility, while also accepting that many social properties are extrinsic and that extrinsic properties are not genuinely causal. While I present some support for each of the three claims that together present the puzzle, I am satisfied to defend the conditional: if one accepts these claims, then one should be a causal holist of the kind I describe.

1 Characterizing the social

What does it mean to say that something is social? We know it when we see it: entities like weddings, money, corporations, and market economies; properties like being the President, being married, and being legal. While this characterization by example is sufficient for the current discussion (I will focus on paradigm cases), it's worth saying a bit more.

Another strategy proceeds by reference to social sciences. Here's the thought: the physical kinds are those described by physics, the biological kinds are those described by biology, and social kinds are those described by the social sciences. What do sociologists study, for example, and how does it differ from psychology? Sociology in the tradition of Durkheim posits *social forces* that arise out of, but still affect, individual psychology. And sociology and economics in the tradition of Marx and Engels explains the evolution of history by appeal to social classes and the internal contradictions of capitalism. From these approaches we get kinds like working class, surplus value, poverty, and delinquency.

A different approach characterizes the social more or less directly based on

our understanding of what unites social kinds. One example of this approach can be found in David-Hillel Ruben's work (Ruben (1985)). Social properties, like having monetary value, are instantiated in virtue of social relations. In the case of monetary value, a particular dollar has value because of a complex set of relations between individuals. So, to ask what a social property is, we need to ask what a social relation is. Ruben considers various criteria concerning what counts as a social relation. He argues that the social cannot be reduced to the non-social, though it is also not emergent (so, he endorses an intermediate position analogous to non-reductive physicalism about mind). He characterizes a social relation as follows:

A relation P is a social relation iff it follows from the fact that P obtains that a system of nested beliefs and expectations exists. A nested system of beliefs and expectations exists iff (1) there is an interlocking set of beliefs and expectations about the actions of agents, (2) there is an interlocking set of higher-order beliefs and expectations about beliefs and expectations, and (3) there are some descending reason-relations among these beliefs, expectations and actions, so that sometimes what agents do is a consequence of their beliefs or expectations about what other agents believe or expect that they will do, and (4) it is generally believed that (3) is true.¹

In short, the social according to Ruben concerns sets of practices in which people have a complex mutual understanding of the nature of the practices.

1.1 Social properties are characteristically extrinsic

Social properties are characteristically extrinsic in that having a social property S typically consists in facts physically extrinsic to the bearer of S . For example, *being a married couple* is defined by a complex set of social relations, perhaps involving a priest or court documents. In this sense many social properties are

¹(Ruben, 1985, 114).

extrinsic. (This is not to say that *all* social properties are extrinsic, a point I return to below.)

Why are social properties characteristically extrinsic? One reason is that many social properties are functional properties in that they are instantiated in virtue of relations external to the bearer of the property. For example, a dollar bill—a particular piece of paper money—is a dollar in virtue of a complex set of social facts external to it; it could cease to be a dollar without changing intrinsically.

Or consider again Ruben’s definition of the social. By Ruben’s definition, the instantiation of any social property depends on a complex set of interrelated psychological states. In many cases the bearers of these psychological states will be far away from the bearer for the property, as in the case of the dollar bill.

The claim that social properties are characteristically extrinsic is orthogonal to the question of whether there are social properties at all, or whether they there are really only social relations. Jonathan Schaffer argues that superficially-monadic predicates like *being a dollar* really designate relations like *being a dollar by the Coinage Act of 1792* and *being a dollar by the Legal Tender Act of 1862* (Schaffer, 2019, 764). For Schaffer, having a social property is typically to be related to a context. However, in the case of social properties of a society, there may be no relation to context. For example, a society may have the property of containing gender hierarchy.

Others deny that social predicates are shorthand for relations, but this should not be taken to mean that social properties are all intrinsic. For example, Brian Epstein differentiates *grounding* from *anchoring* (Epstein (2015)). The ground is the local, specific explanation of the instantiation of the social property, while the anchoring facts determine the social context—the “framing” rules—in which the grounding takes place. In some cases, a social property has intrinsic grounds but extrinsic anchors. For example, the existence of a pick-up basketball team might be grounded in the existence of the players and their intentions to form a team. The team’s existence is anchored in the social prac-

tice of forming teams for the purpose of sports and other activities. However, Epstein's framework does not make extrinsic social properties intrinsic. Note that (i) even though the ground is intrinsic on Epstein account, there is a real sense in which the team's existence depends on things external to it, and (ii) in other cases, such as *being a married couple*, even the ground is extrinsic for Epstein.²

It should not be controversial that many social properties, like *being a dollar bill*, are extrinsic. In other cases it is controversial. Debunking projects aim, in part, at establishing that properties traditionally conceived as intrinsic like *being a man* or *being a woman* in fact depend on one's social position and are therefore extrinsic. There are also social properties that are plausibly intrinsic: social properties of an entire group or society. This observation will form the basis for the view I defend below.

2 Social properties are genuinely causal

Is there genuine causation at the level of the social? Put another way: do social properties like *being a pariah* or *being a corporation* confer causal powers, powers that are not identical to any non-social causal powers? In this section I motivate the claim that genuine social causation is *prima facie* plausible.

2.1 Everyday life and attributions of moral responsibility

Suppose I become President. It seems I thereby gain new powers. As President, I can set the domestic agenda; maybe I can also find out what really happened at Roswell in 1947. It seems that, causally speaking, my situation changes when I become President.

Dollar bills have value, or so it seems when I exchange them for coffee. This value is not entirely due to the dollars' physical characteristics; in other countries, a café might not accept my greenbacks. The dollar bills are *money*

²Also see Schaffer (2019) for arguments that anchoring just is grounding.

here but not there, and this explains how they enter into the causal story of my coffee purchase.

Exxon Mobil is partly to blame for the climate crisis. Exxon Mobil's culpability exceeds the culpability of any CEO or Board President; in fact, it likely even exceeds the *aggregate culpability* of its members. How? It may be that many employees did not know about the full impacts of Exxon Mobil's actions that obfuscated the effects of greenhouse gases. Nevertheless, the corporation should be held responsible for these actions. This implies that the corporation itself took some action not fully attributable to its members.

Social identities seem to matter, causally speaking. As Catharine MacKinnon writes:

Epistemologically speaking, women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face. No matter how they think about it. try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, keeps forcing them into certain molds. No matter what they think or do, they cannot get out of it. It has all the indeterminacy of a bridge abutment hit at sixty miles per hour.³

Gender, though social, plays a role in determining the experience of many.

In each of these cases there is good reason to think that the social features matter, causally speaking. There is also little hope for reductive analysis of the social in the sense of finding informative identities between the social and non-social. For example, one might try to reduce presidential powers to beliefs, but this only pushes the problem back a step: how do we characterize these beliefs without reference to the social (Ruben (1985))? Further, in each case the social properties involved are multiply-realizable, even with respect to the token social properties and their realizations. For example, the very same dollar bill could have been cut in half and taped back together without changing with respect to the token property instance of its value. The dollar didn't lose any value in the process of being cut and taped together; the process did not change the

³MacKinnon (1989), pg. 123, quoted in Haslanger (1995).

dollar with respect to its value, only with respect to its physical characteristics. This supports the claim that the token instance of the social property of having value is distinct from the physical state that realizes it.⁴ So, we have good reason to think that social properties matter causally but also that they cannot be reduced.

2.2 Argument from social science

Why should social scientists be concerned with abstract-sounding causal claims? Shouldn't they only be concerned with establishing robust correlations? Granted, social scientists do not need to answer philosophical questions about causation in order to accomplish research goals. However, social scientists are often interested in what causes what. This makes the philosophical question of explaining the possibility of social causation pressing for philosophers of social science, or so I argue in this section.⁵

Let's start with an example. Matthew Desmond argues in his recent book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* that eviction is a cause a poverty (Desmond (2016)). He does not merely argue that eviction is *correlated* with poverty—that wouldn't be news to anyone. His in-depth analysis of various case studies identifies the ways eviction contributes to poverty. It is centrally a causal claim.

Desmond is not unique in using social-scientific methods to make claims about the causal impacts of the social world. More generally, there have been advances in the use of quantitative methods like causal modeling that allow the discovery of causal relationships in data without the use of controlled experiments.⁶ Social scientists can and do make rigorous arguments for causal connections in the social world.

⁴Pereboom and Kornblith (1991); Pereboom (2011) argues that multiple-realizability implies non-identity even of token instances of a mental property and the physical realizer; the same argument can be extended to social examples.

⁵The emphasis on the importance of causation to social-scientific explanation traces back to at least Bhaskar (1979/1998). Contemporary defenses include Lawson (2013) and Elder-Vass (2010). See Cross (2005) and Wahlberg (2020) for critical discussion.

⁶For an overview of causal modeling in the social sciences see Woodward (2006).

Granted, not all social scientific studies aim at revealing causal connections. Some identify surprising correlations without a causal claim. Likewise, medical studies may merely report a strong correlation between, say, smoking and cancer. If the correlation is sufficiently unexpected or of sufficient social significance, the correlation alone is newsworthy. But it should be clear in cases like smoking that the aim is ultimately to understand underlying causal structure. Based on the medical research, a doctor will recommend that one stops smoking in order to lower one's chances of getting cancer.

Like medical researchers, social scientists are often interested in explaining why certain outcomes occur in order to predict and manipulate outcomes. To do so, some understanding of the underlying causal relationships is important. For example, some researchers are interested in finding causes of poverty in order to prevent poverty; finding properties merely correlated with poverty would not accomplish this goal (though of course correlations may provide evidence of other causal connections).

But why think these causal connections are essentially social? One might grant that there are successful social-scientific explanations but hold that these explanations are mere stand-ins for underlying causal explanations that do not appeal to social kinds. Instead, one might think that all successful social-scientific explanations reduce to purely psychological explanations.

Derk Pereboom and Hilary Kornblith summarize the non-reductivist's argument into two steps (Pereboom and Kornblith (1991)). The first step, discussed above, is that social properties are multiply-realizable. A particular social property, like *being a committee*, can be realized in many ways. This shows that social properties are not identical to their realizers. The second step is that multiple-realizability implies that any attempted reduction of social properties to the non-social will not yield law-like explanatory generalizations of the kind we find in the social sciences. Explanatory social kinds like sociological or economic kinds are realizable in myriad ways, and hypotheses involving these kinds translated into statements involving their realizers won't support explanatory

theories of the patterns we observe in the social world. The appearance of social kinds in successful scientific explanations provides evidence that social kinds correspond to something real that is irreducible to non-social kinds.

The present aim is only to suggest that it is *prima facie* plausible that there are genuine social causes, and that some hold this view. The problem then is that social properties are characteristically extrinsic, and it is not clear that extrinsic properties can be genuinely causal.

3 Causes are intrinsic

In the previous section, we asked if social properties are genuinely causal. A similar question has been much discussed about the mental: is there genuine mental causation, or does mental causation reduce to physical (i.e., brain-level) causation? A major challenge for genuine mental causation is that mental content seems to be extrinsic. If a mental state is a relation to something distant, then what causal contribution does the representational state make?

The aim of this section is to further explore this complaint and its motivations in the context of social properties. I believe social ontologists should take the problem seriously, and so in the following section I defend an account of social causation that renders social causation compatible with the requirement that causation be intrinsic.⁷

An example, due to Fred Dretske (Dretske (1998)), motivates and clarifies the worry. Imagine you are thirsty, so you go to a vending machine to buy a soda. You might think that the value of the quarters you put in a vending machine explain why the soda comes out. But consider: if you had inserted fake coins of the same size and weight, a soda would still have come out. Similarly, if a new law removed quarters as legal tender, but the machine remains the same, then the very same quarters would still buy you a soda despite the quarters now being valueless. It seems that the value of the quarters does not causally

⁷Wahlberg (2020) presents a similar argument focused on causal powers. See also Wahlberg (2022), which I discuss below.

explain why the machine gave you a soda after all; only the intrinsic features of the coins like their size and weight causally explain the outcome.

Of course there are things one could say about this example; I consider Dretske's own response below. But the important takeaway is the following challenge. How can the extrinsic features of a thing, including its social properties, play a role in causing events, if it seems like the intrinsic features of the thing do all the work?

The requirement that causes be intrinsic is reflected in several major theories of causation. These split between Humean and anti-Humean. The requirement that causation be intrinsic is most clear on anti-Humean analyses. For causal powers theorists, like Sydney Shoemaker, causal connections are the manifestation of the intrinsic natures of properties.⁸ Properties play their roles in causation essentially, and perhaps uniquely. As a result, causal connections are intrinsic.⁹

On some manipulationist accounts of causation, most notably due to Judea Pearl, causal connections are represented by connections between variables in structural equation models.¹⁰ The causal connection is taken as basic, and the variables are defined intrinsically (Blanchard and Schaffer (2017)).

Even Humeans try to accommodate the intuition that causes must be local and intrinsic. This presents a challenge for social theorists who define paradigmatic social properties extrinsically but maintain the causal efficacy of the social. Why think that the causal relata must be characterized intrinsically if one is a Humean? Consider a paradigmatic causal process, like a someone throwing a rock to break a window. The intrinsicness intuition is that, roughly speaking, any duplicate of the causal process that led up to the window breaking should also be a window-breaking causal process, holding fixed the laws (Lewis, 1986, 205). Ned Hall offers the following precisification of this thought:

⁸Shoemaker (1980). For a recent defense of causal powers in the context of the social sciences, see Elder-Vass (2010) and Lawson (2013).

⁹See Wahlberg (2020) for detailed discussion of the causal powers approach to social ontology.

¹⁰Pearl (2009); see also Woodward (2006) for discussion of causal modeling in the social sciences.

Suppose an event e occurs at some time t' . Then consider the structure of events that consists of e , together with all of its causes back to some arbitrary earlier time t . That structure has a certain intrinsic character, determined by the way the constituent events happen, together with their spatiotemporal relations to one another. It also has a certain causal character: In particular, each of the constituent events is a cause of e (except e itself, of course). Then the Intrinsicness thesis states that any possible structure of events that exists in a world with the same laws, and that has the same intrinsic character as our given structure, also duplicates this aspect of its causal character—that is, each duplicate of one of e 's causes is itself a cause of the e -duplicate. (Hall, 2004b, 239)

Hall argues we should accept this intrinsicness requirement at least for one understanding of 'cause'. For example, he argues that it solves the problem of overdetermination for the Humean (Hall (2004a)) and double-prevention (Hall (2004b)). Likewise, Lewis argues that an intrinsicness thesis (for him, stated in terms of naturalness) can distinguish genuine from spurious causation in cases of overlapping events (Lewis, 1983, 368–370). We should conclude that there is good reason to think that genuine causation is intrinsic even if Humeanism is true about causation.¹¹

3.1 Argument from Realism

Richard Boyd offers a different line of argument for thinking that realism about some kind K is incompatible with K being an extrinsic kind (e.g., Boyd (1980)). Boyd argues that realism about K implies that members of K should make a causal difference, and to do so they should be characterized in terms of the properties that compose their causal essences, i.e., intrinsically. Kinds defined

¹¹Hall does recognize a second notion of causation; see especially his paper “Two Concepts of Causation” (Hall (2004b)). I take it is still a bad result for social science if no social properties enter in relations of productive causation, as this seems to be the central notion in realist approaches to the sciences.

purely relationally do not meet the realist's standards for scientific explanation, and so do not correspond to properties that enter into causal explanations.

Boyd argues on naturalistic and empiricist grounds in favor of realism about natural kinds. Realist views of natural kinds have traditionally taken two forms. The first, due to Putnam and others,¹² invokes *explanatory real essences*. On this understanding of natural kinds, natural kinds correspond to the underlying properties or mechanisms that explain the observable features or causal powers. The second understanding of natural kinds identifies them with their role in induction (e.g., Quine (1969), Chapter 5). On this understanding, natural kinds are those that underwrite successful inductive inferences.

Boyd brings these conceptions together:

Kinds characterized by 'explanatory essences' are also kinds from the point of view of inductive generalization: indeed, in mature sciences, kinds which are explicitly characterized in terms of explanatory essences are the overwhelmingly typical cases of inductively natural kinds. Kinds natural from the point of view of successful induction need not always be explanatorily natural kinds, but they must correspond in relevant respects to the (perhaps unobservable) properties and mechanisms which causally determine the observable properties of the subjects of empirical generalizations.¹³

Are there any natural kinds in the social sciences? Boyd allows that there are higher-level natural kinds. According to his account, natural kind terms must refer to the intrinsic causal basis of observed phenomena. But, as argued above, in the case of many social properties there is no such intrinsic basis. So it seems that they cannot be natural kinds, and so cannot be genuinely causal.

To be clear, the argument in this section is not that social kinds are excluded from causality merely by definition of 'natural kind'. Instead, the argument is that the methodology of realist approaches to science involves identifying the

¹²E.g., Putnam (1965, 1975).

¹³Boyd (1980), page 642. See also Pereboom (2011), Chapter 8.

intrinsic bases for observed patterns of phenomena, i.e., identifying the underlying mechanisms that explain what happens. On this picture, functional and extrinsic kinds are merely useful placeholders, useful in summaries or as placeholders for future intrinsic explanations. The perspective of scientific realists should have some sway in this context, as we are taking seriously the possibility of genuine social causation.

To summarize: on many accounts, genuine causes must be intrinsic. However, social properties fail to be intrinsic. To preserve the genuine causal contribution of social properties, something must be said to resolve this tension. I'll consider two answers in the next section.

4 Social Causation?

Suppose we accept the three claims:

1. Social properties are characteristically extrinsic.
2. Social properties are genuinely causal.
3. Causes are intrinsic.

How should we resolve the tension here? In this section I consider two approaches to preserving the causal contribution of social properties. The first approach distinguishes two different kinds of causal contribution a property might make. I will argue that this approach is not satisfactory. Instead, I argue we should take a different approach: “zoom out” until we find the intrinsic social property of the social system. This is a compromise position aimed at capturing the appeal behind theses (1)–(3). It is a compromise because it renders extrinsic social properties like *being an eviction* or *being a delinquent* causal only in relation to a larger social system. Nevertheless, the proposal avoids some weaknesses of alternatives while preserving genuine causation at the social level.

4.1 Approach 1: Distinguishing Social Causation

Recall the case of the quarters going in the vending machine: is it the value of the quarters that explains why the machine drops a soda, or is it the shape and weight of the quarters? Dretske (1998) argues that it must be the shape and weight of the quarters, since fake coins of the same shape and weight would also yield a soda. The shape and weight of the coins are a sufficient proximate cause of the soda dropping; the value of the coins seems causally inert. However, Dretske maintains that the value of the coins does contribute to the overall causal story.

To capture the causal contribution of the value of the quarters, Dretske argues that the value of quarters explains *why the shape and weight of the coins cause a soda to drop*. In other words, the idea is that the complex social system causally explains why the machine is configured to accept coins of that particular size and weight. In previous work, he called this a “structuring cause” (Dretske (1988)). The shape and weight of the coins is, by contrast, a “triggering cause.”

Sally Haslanger draws on Dretske’s account to argue that this is how we should think of social-structural explanations generally (Haslanger (2016)). For example, suppose a student of a low socio-economic status is forced to work through college to provide for themselves. As a result, they are less prepared for class and score lower than their peers on the final exam. What caused them to receive their score? One explanation is that they took a job instead of studying. This does seem to be the more immediate, triggering cause of their performance. After all, they took the test to the best of their abilities at that moment. But this also seems to be an insufficient explanation, given that their choices were severely constrained by their economic position.

While initially appealing, there are several problems with this approach to capturing social causation. First, notice the two major motivations for distinguishing triggering from structuring causes: the social property is not intrinsic and there is a more immediate sufficient cause. Both of these considerations still apply when we consider the causal contribution of the structuring cause.

Returning to the example of quarters, won't the complex social fact comprising the value of the quarters face a similar analysis into triggering causes, since it is also composed of many smaller events that form a series of immediate causes? The "structuring cause" seems to be a shorthand for more triggering causes, further back in the causal story.

A similar worry applies when we think of how structuring causes constrain possibilities. *Constraining* is clearly a causal notion. To keep the notions from collapsing back into each other, Dretske (and Haslanger) would have to say that structuring causes constrain possibilities primitively. But then the account seems to only offer a label for the phenomenon we hoped to explain. What is this novel kind of determination?¹⁴

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg takes a different approach that also involves distinguishing social causation from paradigmatic examples of physical causation. He suggests we should distinguish sparse from abundant causation (Wahlberg (2022)). On his account, social properties are mere Cambridge properties; for an object to have a social property only implies a true predication of the object, not any genuine intrinsic change. Likewise, for a social property to play a role in causation means only that a particular statement of dependence becomes true, e.g., if the property hadn't been instantiated, the event wouldn't have occurred. On the abundant conception of causation, there is no assumption of intrinsicness.

There are two problems with Hansson Wahlberg's account, however. First, it would seem to imply there is no genuine higher-level causation; all genuine (i.e., sparse) causation is at the micro-physical level. He accepts that this may be an implication of his account, but to many the rejection of the causal contribution of higher level properties across the special sciences is a high cost (for discussion, see Pereboom and Kornblith (1991)). The second problem with Hansson Wahlberg's account is that presumably moral responsibility requires genuine, sparse causation, not mere abundant causation (otherwise we may be morally

¹⁴The same complaints apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Jackson and Pettit (1992), who introduce the analogous notion of "programming" cause.

responsible for far too much). But then his account would preclude the moral responsibility of groups, including corporations. Further, it would seem to split the methodology of fundamental science from all special sciences. But many subscribe to the unity of science at least on a general methodological level.

These considerations are hardly decisive, but I hope to have at least motivated an alternative to the various approaches that distinguish social causation from more fundamental forms.

4.2 Approach 3: Bigger Causes

Instead of positing some new form of causation for social properties, I propose locating the causal efficacy of the social world in those social properties that are intrinsic: properties of the whole society, or else social properties dependent on nothing outside the group that instantiates them.¹⁵

What would this account look like? I assume that it is desirable for our account of social causation to be physicalist in the sense that it maintains that all causes are broadly physical, and so rejects strong forms of emergentism or property dualism.¹⁶ This isn't a typical statement of the thesis often called 'Physicalism', but I hope it is clear why it deserves the label. Physicalists are committed to everything that makes a causal difference being broadly physical. Typical statements of physicalism do not require that, for example, all mathematical truths are grounded in the narrowly physical; they are concerned with, most notably, mental states and their causal interactions with physical states.

This constraint should be met if we wish to maintain that there is genuine causation at the social level. Few today would recognize the causal contributions of an ethereal "zeitgeist" guiding history. Even ardent dualists who deny Physicalism do not have reason to accept non-physical social causes in addition to non-physical phenomenal causes.

¹⁵Strictly speaking, the account I propose in this section is compatible with also positing structuring causes or a sparse/abundant distinction in causation. But I offer the view as an alternative because it addresses the same set of problems that these views were introduced to address.

¹⁶I use 'narrowly physical' to refer to properties described by physics, and 'broadly physical' to refer to properties fully constituted by narrowly physical properties.

Non-reductive physicalism about mind offers a model for how to think about social causes. For example, Derk Pereboom argues that mental states are compositional properties intrinsic to their bearers (Pereboom (2011)). On his account mental states are broadly physical and are genuine causes. Can we say something similar?

To make this move, we need to move from extrinsic to intrinsic social properties. Consider *being a delinquent*. Whether an adolescent is a delinquent depends on their actions and the social context, making delinquency an extrinsic feature of the adolescent. But, zooming out, we can see that whether a society contains delinquents is intrinsic to the society. The arguments so far do not bar us from identifying a kind of social structure, one which contains delinquency, and identifying this structure as the causal basis for the effects of delinquency. Let's spell this out more carefully.

Social properties at the level of the social system are *compositional*: they are had solely in virtue of the intrinsic nature of the social system's parts and the relations between those parts, such as mutually-recognized intentions. This is not to say that social systems are *mere composites*, i.e., mereological wholes. Mereological wholes have their parts essentially, while social systems can be multiply realized.

Instead of mereological composition, I will say the the social is *constituted* out of the behaviors of individuals and their interaction with their environments (perhaps in the way that Ruben describes). Following Pereboom, we can characterize constitution in terms of a primitive irreflexive and asymmetric "making up" relation:

x materially constitutes y at t if and only if

- (a) y is made up of and materially coincident with x at t ;
- (b) necessarily, if x exists at t , then y exists at t and is made up of and materially coincident with x at t ; and

(c) possibly, y exists at t and it is not the case that y is made up of and materially coincident with x at t .

How would this apply to the social? Pereboom considers the case of a driver's license. Is the license constituted by the piece of plastic? No; I could lose my license while keeping the piece of plastic, violating condition (b). In response to this problem, Lynn Baker suggests relativizing to contexts (Baker (2007)). But in many cases of social properties, the context seems to do all the work. The arguments from Section 3 then indicate that the social property cannot contribute any genuine causal powers to its bearer.

Pereboom does not suggest a fix for the case of the driver's license. I suggest we apply the definition of constitution to the entire social system, resulting in a kind of causal holism about social properties. Applying the definition: by (a), a social system is made up of and materially coincident with its realizer. By (b), the realizer necessitates the existence of social system. So, the realizer must encompass the entire social system, else there may be a failure of necessitation, as in the case of the driver's license. By (c), the social system is multiply-realizable.

If Pereboom is right that his account of the mental qualifies as physicalism, then this application of his account to the social implies that the social is broadly physical. Instances of social properties are micro-based in the narrowly physical, and so count as physical. The properties of being President, being a dollar, and being a recession are all broadly physical properties, understood as components of the larger social system.

In response, one might argue that entities like the US Constitution are abstract entities, rather than physical, based on the following kind of argument: even if we burned every copy of the Constitution, the US would still have a constitution. But all this shows is that the US Constitution is not identical to its various paper copies. It does not show that the US Constitution is an abstract object. The US Constitution is a component of a physical social system.

The view is in some ways analogous to causal accounts of natural selection. A

creature's fitness is extrinsic to it, and so is not an intrinsic state of the creature that explains its survival. Nevertheless, natural selection causally explains the survival of species at the population level.¹⁷

Hansson Wahlberg has argued against this view (Wahlberg (2020)). He argues that the bigger causes view still faces the following dilemma. On the first horn, social causes are emergent in the sense that the causal powers they confer do not appear at the lower non-social level. He argues that this kind of emergence is not plausible, since it would imply downward causation, violating the closure of the physical under the physical laws. He argues that the positing of downward causation is not justified in the case of social causation (see also Wahlberg (2014)). On the other horn, the causal powers do appear at the lower level and are inherited at the higher level. On this horn, the social world offers no unique causal contribution; it should be cut by Occam's razor.

The view I propose can resolve this dilemma. The first observation to make is that it is unclear what lower-level things share the same higher-level power. Hansson Wahlberg writes that the individuals *related as they are* have the same causal powers as the social object. But this sounds like ascribing a causal power to a fact—the fact that the individuals are related how they are. Instead, Hansson Wahlberg seems to mean that the individuals instantiate the causal power, and this causal power manifests in context (compare: the power of massive objects to attract each other manifests relative to the distances between them). However, the problem is then that in many circumstances the social relations will be doing all the work; the individuals could be any individuals whatsoever, as long as they are appropriately related. It then seems that the causal powers at the lower level are had merely in virtue of intrinsic properties like *being human*. This is an unwelcome result; the causal relationships described by social scientists and witnessed in everyday life demand a more complex explanation. Instead, the causal powers are born by the complex social object, but made up by lower-level causal powers, like the intrinsic ability of humans to form

¹⁷For a compelling argument in favor of a causal understanding of natural selection and fitness, see Otsuka (2016). Thank you to Brandon Conley for discussion.

intentions to action, complex representations, etc.¹⁸

5 Objections and replies

To close, I will consider some additional objections and offer replies.

5.1 Social scientists don't talk this way

Social scientists do not typically theorize in terms of *kinds of social systems*. So doesn't the monist position contradict the argument from social science in Section 2.2?

I do not think so. If a complex system forms a highly projectible kind, then it is likely that parts of the system will also be projectible, *even if they cannot exist outside the system*. Consider, for example, the heart. A heart is a functional kind that would not exist absent bodies. As such, having the property of *being a heart* does not confer genuine causal powers. But the kind *heart* is highly projectible in the sense that it supports strong inductive inferences (e.g., creatures with hearts also have kidneys). The projectibility of a social kind will allow the kind to be useful in social theorizing even if the causal contribution of the kind can only occur within the context of the system in which the kind occurs (for the heart, the larger system is the whole body).

5.2 Is group causation incompatible with autonomy?

One might argue that genuine social causation at the level of the social system contradicts individual autonomy. If society causes my actions, can they really be attributed to me?

In response, first, social forces *causally influence* us, but that does not mean that they determine our actions. And autonomy must be compatible with causal influence if it is to exist at all. Second, there is not a competition between levels. When I lift a glass of water to my mouth, does my hand lift the glass, or do

¹⁸It should also be pointed out that the arguments of Pereboom and Kornblith (1991) apply here. The social causal powers are multiply-realizable, and so are not identical to the causal powers of any particular realizer. They are therefore not redundant.

I? It seems both are true: I lift the glass by commanding my hand to lift the glass. The hand lifts the glass even though I also lift it. So, the individual causing some event does not rule out the group also causing the event through that individual.

5.3 Do groups like corporations actually cause anything on your view?

One might object that on my account a corporation can't really cause anything. The true cause is the social whole in which the corporation is a part, not the corporation. So how can we hold corporations responsible for their actions?

This is a feature of the view, not a bug. For each effect of the social system, various parts of the social system matter to different degrees. In some cases, it may be that the social system is more to blame than the individual or group that is the proximate cause. For example, think of children bullying another child for their worn-out clothing. In this case we might blame the social norms (and so, society as a whole) rather than the children. In other cases, the group is more to blame. An example of the latter might be Exxon Mobil deliberately misleading the public about the evidence for climate change. Though, even in that case, one might appeal to the perverse incentives within a capitalist economy. On reflection, their obfuscation may seem like an inevitable outcome of a private fossil fuel industry.

When we blame social entities like corporations for harmful outcomes, we should recognize that they are only a component of the social cause. Yet in some cases they are the most important part, which justifies holding them accountable.

5.4 Exclusion

Some worry that social causation creates a problematic form of redundant overdetermination. Redundant overdetermination includes cases like two rocks striking a window at the same time, causing the window to break. The problem

isn't that this never happens; it's that given one sufficient cause, we don't need to posit another.

In the case of the social, it seems that for each social cause, there is also an individual cause. For example, gender norms cause harm, including discrimination. But for each harm attributable to gender norms, there is an individual (or individuals) causing the harm. So, there seem to be two causes: the norms and the individual. And we don't want to deny that the individual caused the harm. So, why posit the additional cause, the gender norm?

First, it is worth noting that in these cases of redundant overdetermination the social cause is constituted by a lower-level physical cause. Grounded properties arguably do not come at an ontological cost (Schaffer (2015)). Second, arguments from multiple realizability motivate positing the higher level properties. And, third, these properties earn their keep by tracking different explanations across a variety of circumstances. By focusing on only the actual physical realizer, we miss patterns of causation across different social arrangements, e.g., different ways gender norms manifest across societies.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to argue that it is possible to coherently believe the following three theses:

1. Social properties are characteristically extrinsic.
2. Social properties are genuinely causal.
3. Causes are intrinsic.

The solution proposed is to recognize that larger social properties are intrinsic to their bearers, and so can confer genuine causal powers. Put more concretely: the way a society is organized matters, causally, to outcomes for individuals. I argued that this thesis is compatible with there also being individual-level causes of the very same outcomes. Social causation, like mental causation, can

be understood in non-reductive terms without either elimination nor downward causation.

References

- Baker, Lynne Rudder. *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Bhaskar, Roy. *The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences*. London: Routledge, 1979/1998.
- Blanchard, Thomas, and Jonathan Schaffer. “Cause Without Default.” In *Making a Difference*, edited by Helen Beebe, Christopher Hitchcock, and Huw Price, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 175–214.
- Boyd, Richard. “Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology.” *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 1980: (1980) 613–662.
- Cross, Troy. “What is a Disposition?” *Synthese* 144, 3: (2005) 321–41.
- Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown, 2016.
- Dretske, Fred. *Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes*. MIT Press, 1988.
- . “Minds, Machines, and Money: What Really Explains Behavior.” In *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*, edited by J. A. M. Bransen, and S. E. Cuypers, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998, 157–173.
- Elder-Vass, Dave. *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Epstein, Brian. *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Hall, Ned. “The Intrinsic Character of Causation.” *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 1: (2004a) 255–300.

- . “Two Concepts of Causation.” In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by John Collins, Ned Hall, and Laurie Paul, The MIT Press, 2004b, 225–276.
- Haslanger, Sally. “Ontology and Social Construction.” *Philosophical Topics* 23, 2: (1995) 95–125.
- . “What is a (Social) Structural Explanation?” *Philosophical Studies* 173, 1: (2016) 113–130.
- Jackson, Frank, and Philip Pettit. “Structural Explanation in Social Theory.” In *Reduction, Explanation, and Realism*, edited by K. Lennon, and D. Charles, Oxford University Press, 1992, 97–131.
- Lawson, T. “Emergence and social causation.” In *Powers and capacities in philosophy: The new aristotelianism*, edited by R. Groff, and G. Greco, New York: Routledge, 2013, 285–307.
- Lewis, David. “New Work for a Theory of Universals.” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61, December: (1983) 343–377.
- . “Causal Explanation.” In *Philosophical Papers Vol. II*, edited by David Lewis, Oxford University Press, 1986, 214–240.
- MacKinnon, Catharine. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Otsuka, Jun. “A Critical Review of the Statisticalist Debate.” *Biology and Philosophy* 31, 4: (2016) 459–482.
- Pearl, Judea. *Causality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Pereboom, Derk. *Consciousness and the Prospects of Physicalism*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Pereboom, Derk, and Hilary Kornblith. “The Metaphysics of Irreducibility.” *Philosophical Studies* 63, August: (1991) 125–45.

- Putnam, Hilary. “Brains and Behavior.” In *Analytical Philosophy: Second Series*, edited by Ronald J. Butler, Blackwell, 1965.
- Putnam, Hillary. “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’.” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7: (1975) 131–193.
- Quine, W.V.O. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.
- Ruben, David-Hillel. *The Metaphysics of the Social World*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. “What Not to Multiply Without Necessity.” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93, 4: (2015) 644–664.
- . “Anchoring as Grounding: On Epstein’s the Ant Trap.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 99, 3: (2019) 749–767.
- Shoemaker, Sydney. “Causality and Properties.” In *Time and Cause*, edited by Peter van Inwagen, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980, 109–35.
- Wahlberg, Tobias Hansson. “Elder-Vass on the Causal Power of Social Structures.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 44, 6: (2014) 774–791.
- . “Causal Powers and Social Ontology.” *Synthese* 197, 3: (2020) 1357–1377.
- . “Sparse Causation and Mere Abundant Causation.” *Philosophical Studies* 1–22.
- Woodward, James. “Causal Models in the Social Sciences.” In *Philosophy of Science, Volume 8 (Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology)*., edited by Stephen Turner, and Mark Risjord, Elsevier, 2006, 157–210.